

RED PAPER

EU-BELARUS SECURITY FRAMEWORK 2025



Military Security

Energy security

Information Security

Economic security

Migration Security Youth Security



**SVIATLANA
TSIKHANOUSKAYA**
OFFICE

iSANS

The International Strategic Action
Network for Security

NATIONAL
ANTI-CRISIS
MANAGEMENT

BELPOL

Table of Contents

Introduction	4	Financial Stability	42
Military Security	6	Production Security	42
General context	7	External Economic Resilience	43
Increasing military cooperation between Russia and Belarus	7	Technological and Resource Sustainability	43
Belarus as a Field for Russian Hybrid Attacks	7	Institutional Integrity	44
Belarus's Preparation for Potential Direct Military Involvement Alongside Russia	9	Threats to Belarus's Economic Security	44
The Lukashenka Regime as Part of a Global Autocratic Alliance	9	Conclusion	46
Threats and Risks	10	Recommendations	47
Conclusion	10	Migration Security	49
Recommendations	13	General Context	50
Energy security	16	Migration as a Hybrid Threat	50
Analysis of the Energy Mix of Belarus	17	Russia's Involvement in the Instrumentalization of Migration	51
Electricity Sector	18	Humanitarian Risks	52
Heat Energy Sector	20	Political Destabilization and Polarization in the EU	52
Biomass	21	Testing Western Resilience	53
Oil Refining	22	Opportunities	53
Gas supply	23	Supporting the Belarusian Democratic Movement	55
Energy Efficiency	24	Conclusion	55
Personnel and Community	25	Recommendations	56
Risks/Threats	26	Youth Security	58
Conclusion	26	General Context	59
Recommendations	27	Repression of Youth	59
Information Security	28	Exodus and Brain Drain	60
General context	30	The Regime's Countermeasures	61
The Information Vertical and Its Associated Threats	31	Response of the EU	62
Political and Doctrinal Foundations	32	Ideological Indoctrination in Belarus	62
Propaganda Expansion	33	Erosion of EU Influence and Growing Russian Leverage	64
Key Propaganda Narratives	34	Economic and Security Implications of Youth Repression	66
Significance for the European Union	35	Youth as Agents of Democratic Change and Resilience	67
Conclusion	37	Conclusion	68
Recommendations	38	Recommendations	70
Economic Security	40	Conclusion	72
Macroeconomic Performance	41		

This policy paper examines the security implications of Belarus's transformation, under the current authoritarian regime, into a hybrid threat actor on the eastern border of the European Union. It argues that the Lukashenko regime has consolidated a centralized system of control that enables both domestic repression and external security destabilisation. While Belarus remains closely aligned with Russia, it is gaining operational autonomy in areas such as information operations, migration manipulation, and military posture. This makes Belarus a distinct and increasingly independent challenge for EU security policy.

The analysis focuses on six key dimensions of Belarus's threat profile: energy, information, economy, migration, military, and youth. In each of these areas, the regime deploys instruments of coercion and disruption that weaken European resilience and threaten regional stability. At the same time, Belarusian society—including youth, civil society, and Belarusian democratic forces in exile—retains strong potential as a future partner in democratic transition and regional cooperation.

Current EU policy tends to frame Belarus primarily as an extension of Russian influence. This approach limits the effectiveness of early warning systems, targeted response mechanisms, and long-term strategic planning. The paper argues for a more focused and forward-looking EU strategy that treats Belarus as a distinct actor with its own internal dynamics and external ambitions.

Key recommendations include incorporating Belarus-specific risk analysis into EU security and foreign policy frameworks, expanding support to civil society and independent media, engaging more systematically with democratic forces in exile, and preparing for the long-term reintegration of a democratic Belarus into European political, economic, and security structures.

The strategic choice facing the European Union is whether to continue treating Belarus as a secondary concern or to recognize its growing importance in shaping the future of Europe's eastern neighborhood. A more active and precise policy approach is essential to protecting European interests.

Introduction

The future of European security cannot be separated from the future of Belarus. Situated on the EU's eastern flank, Belarus has become an increasingly critical node in the region's geopolitics, serving both as a source of risk and a potential anchor of stability.

As the Lukashenka regime deepens its political, military, economic, and cultural dependence on the Kremlin, Belarus is being transformed into a platform for Russian aggression against Ukraine and neighbouring EU countries. Whether the EU succeeds in securing its eastern frontier depends in large part on whether Belarus can be brought into the orbit of European security cooperation.

This report, titled "Red Paper", highlights the urgency of its topic. Belarus is not merely a victim of geopolitical confrontation; it is a frontline state whose trajectory will shape the future balance of power in Europe. Delays in immediate EU actions or continued complacency risk allowing further entrenchment of Russian influence in key sectors, including conventional military deployment, energy infrastructure, digital and information space, and migration policy. In this context, the democratic forces of Belarus offer a viable alternative to the authoritarian, pro-Russian vision of the authoritarian regime: a sovereign, European-oriented Belarus that contributes to regional security rather than threatening it.

To address all the challenges, the EU must adopt a comprehensive strategy that combines sustained pressure on the Lukashenka regime with meaningful, long-term engagement and incentives for Belarusian society.

This report presents strategic recommendations across several key domains, including conventional security, energy security, migration security, information security, and societal resilience, with a particular emphasis on youth engagement. The main pillar of these recommendations is the geopolitical reorientation of Belarus through its gradual integration into pan-European security, economic, and cultural frameworks. Such a shift would not only deprive Russia of its so-called "strategic balcony" but also reinforce

the EU's eastern flank and diminish the space for hybrid threats.

Finally, the EU must invest in shaping Belarus's future by supporting independent media and civil society, and by empowering the next generation through cultural and educational exchange. Despite the risks, a united approach involving the EU, Ukraine, and Belarusian democratic forces can help to transform the country from a zone of instability into a cornerstone of regional security.



Military Security

Belarus plays a critical role in the EU's military security due to its location on NATO's eastern flank and its deepening military integration with Russia. As a staging ground for Russian forces and hybrid operations, Belarus poses a direct threat to neighboring EU member states and undermines regional stability. Ensuring a sovereign and Europe-oriented Belarus is essential for reducing the Kremlin's strategic reach and strengthening Europe's collective defense.





General context

The Lukashenka regime presently acts as a co-aggressor in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Although the Belarusian military has not deployed troops directly to the frontlines, it plays a supporting role by facilitating joint operations and military activities with Russian forces. Lukashenka has also publicly endorsed the Kremlin's war narrative, claiming that Ukraine, under NATO's influence, has provoked the war.

Several key factors define the current state of Belarus's conventional security posture:

1. **Russian Increasing Military Presence:** Belarus has effectively become a staging ground for Russian military deployments, exercises, and potential escalation scenarios.
2. **Loss of Strategic Autonomy:** Belarus's deepening military dependence on Russia exemplified by joint command structures and the presence of Russian troops and equipment on its territory limits its ability to act independently and increases the risk of entanglement in broader regional conflicts.

3. **Hybrid Threats and Regional Spillover:** Belarus has served as a launchpad for hybrid operations, including disinformation, cyberattacks, and migration pressure campaigns targeting EU states. These actions contribute to instability across the region and blur the lines between conventional and non-conventional threats.

Increasing military cooperation between Russia and Belarus

Belarus's industry has become part of the Kremlin's military machine since the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022. According to the independent media and investigators, at the moment, more than 60% of Belarusian military industry products are exported to Russia¹. In total, Russia's share in Belarusian foreign trade in 2024 exceeded 70%². Belarus's exports directly help the Kremlin to wage the war against Ukraine, amounting to 15% of all Russian military procurements³. This concerns not only the factories being part of the defense industry of Belarus. For example, tires produced by JSC Belshina plant are supplied to the Russian defense ministry and used for a range of vehicles and weapons chassis used by the Russian army in Ukraine⁴. However,

¹ How Belarusian Factories Support the Russian Military-Industrial Complex, Charter97, 2024. <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2024/2/14/583537/>

² Exports Are Growing, but Imports Are Growing Faster: Why Belarus Is Losing Its Foreign Trade Balance, ProBusiness, 2024. <https://probusiness.io/economic/12563-eksport-rastet-no-import-rastet-bystree-pochemu-belarus-terya-et-balans-vovneshney-torgovle.html>

³ Belarus-Russia Cooperation in the Military-Technical Sphere Is Gaining Momentum, Sb.by, 2023. <https://www.sb.by/articles/dvoynoy-shchit-soyuz.html>

⁴ Belarusian gambit. How Belshina continued to supply the Russian military, Belarusian Investigative Center, 2024. <https://investigatebel.org/en/investigations/belshina-sanctions>

Belshina was excluded from the EU sanctions list in March 2024⁵. The range of goods supplied to the Russian military is wide and varies from food and clothes to ammunition⁶.

Belarus is a significant source of grey schemes for Russia to circumvent sanctions. Belarusian industrial enterprises are used to supply goods, which are banned from being imported to Russia. Some of them, like microchips by Integral, are crucial for the production of the missiles, used by the Russian army to attack Ukrainian cities⁷. The supply of whole branches of military goods to Russia is dependent on these schemes, like advanced electronics and optoelectronics, which are essential for guiding and control systems of various weapons, including armored vehicles.

According to the agreements between Belarus and Russia, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus are fully included in the "Regional Group of Forces of Belarus and Russia" on the territory of Belarus. All Belarusian military infrastructure can be used by the Regional Group of Forces, in other words Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in wartime⁸. Within this framework, the Regional united system of air defense of Belarus and Russia has been created, which also gives the Kremlin control over the territory of Belarus. At the same time, the size of Russian troops, included in the Regional Group of Forces isn't precisely limited in the documents, which makes it completely legal for the Kremlin to deploy as many army units in Belarus as it wants⁹.

The Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus are also technologically and ideologically dependent on Russia. After February 2022, Russia became Belarus's only supplier¹⁰ of weapons. At the same time, it should be noted that the overwhelming majority of Belarusian highest military officers, including the highest command,

studied in Russia, while maintaining connections to Russia. This concerns not only a narrow range of military specialists and high command in the Armed Forces, but also the wide range of KGB¹¹ officers, who spend part of their education period in the Academy of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). Which creates not only the high probability of them being ideologically tied to Russia more than to Belarus, but also the threat of Belarus's most strategic departments of the military and law enforcement agencies being infiltrated or even controlled by the agents of Russian secret services. Against this background, the military propaganda of the Lukashenka regime echoes the Russian narratives about the war against Ukraine using phrases such as "Nazi regime in Kyiv", "NATO orchestrating the war against Russia", and others.

Given the above, it is clear that Belarus functions as a de facto proxy of Russia, with key military decisions made in the Kremlin. The regime in Minsk exercises little to no control over the actions of Russian military forces and special services operating on Belarusian territory.



⁵ Arrêt du tribunal, InfoCuria Rechtsprechung, 2024. <https://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?text=belarus&docid=284068&pageIndex=0&doclang=EN&mode=req&dir=&occ=first&part=1&cid=3982839#ctx1>

⁶ Lukashenka Has Dragged Belarus into the War, Belpol, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGKP7eGZH1o>

⁷ Deadly chips. How Integral bypasses sanctions and helps Russia keep the war going, Belarusian Investigative Center, 2025. <https://investigatebel.org/en/investigations/integral-pomoshch-rossii-voyna>

⁸ Agreement Between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on Joint Protection of the External Border of the Union State in Airspace and the Establishment of a Unified Regional Air Defense System of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus, Ministry of international affairs, 2009. https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/international_contracts/2_contract/45413/

⁹ Protocol Between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on Amendments to the Agreement Between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on Joint Provision of Regional Security in the Military Sphere of December 19, 1997, 2022. <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202403010002?index=1>

¹⁰ Trends in international arms transfers, SIPRI, 2024. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/fs_2403_at_2023.pdf

¹¹ Belarusian secret service, which remained the same name as the secret service of the USSR

Belarus as a Field for Russian Hybrid Attacks

Belarus has emerged as a critical staging ground for Russian hybrid operations directed against the European Union. These actions form part of a broader Kremlin strategy aimed at undermining the political cohesion, societal resilience, and border security of EU member states. Enabled by its deepening subordination to Moscow, the Lukashenko regime has actively facilitated, and at times directly participated in, a range of non-conventional threats that blur the lines between internal and external security challenges.

One of the most visible and pressing manifestations of this threat is the instrumentalization of migration for political purposes. Since 2021, Belarus – working in coordination with Russian security services – has orchestrated the movement of migrants from the Middle East and other regions to the EU's eastern borders, particularly targeting Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. These state-sponsored operations involve the deliberate luring and transporting of migrants to the borders under false pretences, often accompanied by psychological warfare tactics and provocations against EU border guards (please see more details in the chapter on Migration Security).

In addition, Belarus has become a launchpad for intelligence and subversive operations. Belarusian citizens – some coerced, others recruited – have been

deployed by Russian and Belarusian intelligence agencies to infiltrate Western countries. Their missions have included espionage, sabotage, cyber intrusions, and disinformation campaigns. According to Polish intelligence sources, several documented incidents in recent years have directly linked Belarusian nationals to hostile activities targeting military infrastructure, critical energy assets, and civil society organizations. These operations reflect a deliberate attempt to exploit Belarus's geographic proximity, shared language networks, and relatively easy access to the Schengen zone through third countries.

Moreover, Belarus media actors have amplified Russian disinformation narratives aimed at weakening EU support for Ukraine, discrediting NATO, and fostering societal divisions in member states. Online influence campaigns frequently originate from accounts or platforms with Belarusian affiliations, spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda and conspiracy theories tailored to exploit domestic grievances within EU countries.

Taken together, these developments underscore the role of Belarus not merely as a passive actor under Russian influence, but as an active enabler of hybrid threats. This evolving threat environment calls for a more integrated and forward-looking EU response – including enhanced intelligence sharing, stricter screening of Belarusian nationals linked to security services, and coordinated counter-hybrid strategies.



Belarus's Preparation for Potential Direct Military Involvement Alongside Russia

Legislative innovations. In 2022, Belarus adopted a new constitution that removed the country's status as a neutral and non-nuclear state and significantly expanded the role of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA). This body received key powers to approve the use of troops abroad and authorize martial law and a state of emergency, effectively becoming a tool to legitimize any military decisions¹².

At the VII ABPA in April 2024, a new national security concept and military doctrine were approved. For the first time, these documents outlined Belarus's readiness to participate in military operations abroad in support of its allies, primarily Russia¹³. For the first time, the doctrine also allowed for preemptive strikes if a conflict is deemed inevitable, radically shifting the country's defensive strategy¹⁴.

Legislative updates – including new versions of the laws on martial law and the state of emergency – further expanded the state's powers during crises¹⁵.

Modernization of the Armed Forces. Since 2022, there has been a significant increase in the number of contract soldiers, with the number of contracted servicemen growing by 1.5 times¹⁶. Unlike conscripts, contract soldiers can be deployed for more complex tasks, including participation in actual combat operations abroad. Plans are in place to expand the army to 80,000 personnel¹⁷, especially in view of the establishment of the Southern Operational Command, directly linked to the

Ukrainian direction.

At the same time, the Armed Forces reserve of Belarus is estimated at nearly 300,000 people, providing ample opportunity for rapid military expansion. In 2024–2025, procedures for potential mobilization were significantly simplified. Military enlistment offices were given the right to send legally binding draft notices via SMS¹⁸. Similar mobilization measures were previously introduced in Russia. Cases of criminal prosecution for evading service have been recorded.

In 2023, the formation of a national militia began. Its size could reach up to 150,000 people¹⁹ and is a key element of a total war strategy. These forces are being trained for territorial defense and internal control. At the same time, special units of the internal troops are being strengthened, indicating plans to form a “second front” inside the country in the event of destabilization.

Since early 2024, the intensity of exercises involving territorial troops and civilian personnel has sharply increased. In January 2025, large-scale drills were held in the Homiel region, involving reservists, the

Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the national militia²⁰. Similar exercises took place in the Hrodna region in April²¹. The drills included camouflage operations, anti-sabotage actions, and coordination between different security agencies.

Border reinforcement and construction of defensive structures. Since 2023, Belarus has been actively implementing a project to build a system of defensive

¹² The Law of the Republic of Belarus 7th of February 2023 № 248-3, <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12300248>

¹³ Decision of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly No. 5 of April 25, 2024. <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=P924v0005>

¹⁴ Decision of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly No. 6 of April 25, 2024. <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=P924v0006>

¹⁵ The Law of the Republic of Belarus 10th of January 2015 № 244-3. <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H11500244>

¹⁶ The General Staff reported how much the number of contract soldiers has increased in Belarus, Euroradio, 2024. <https://euroradio.fm/ru/v-genshtabe-rasskazali-naskolko-v-belarusi-uvelichilos-kolichestvo-kontraktnikov>

¹⁷ Belarus plans to increase the size of its army to 80,000 troops, Ukrainian truth, 2022. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2022/06/7/7350976/>

¹⁸ Law of the Republic of Belarus No. 363-3 of April 3, 2024. <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12400363>

¹⁹ Khrenin: The number of territorial defense militia could reach up to 150,000 people, SB.BY, 2023. <https://www.sb.by/articles/khrenin-chislennost-narodnogo-opolcheniya-mozhet-sostavit-do-150-tysyach-chelovek.html?amp=1>

²⁰ In the Gomel district, territorial defense training exercises are being held from January 8 to 31, 2025. <https://gomelisp.gov.by/v-gomelskom-rajone-s-8-po-31-yanvarya-2025-g-provodyatsya-uchebnye-sbory-s-silami-territorialnoj-oborony/?print=print>

²¹ A command and staff exercise of the territorial troops will be held in the Hrodna region, Belta, 2025. <https://belta.by/regions/view/komandno-shtabnoe-uchenie-territorialnyh-vojsk-projdet-v-grodnenskoj-oblasti-708749-2025/>

fortifications known as the “Khrenin Line”²² (named after the Minister of defense of Belarus Viktor Khrenin). These fortified areas, officially referred to as “resistance nodes,” are being established along strategically important directions – primarily in the south, along the border with Ukraine, and in the west, near the borders with Poland and Lithuania. They include trench systems, long-term firing positions, mine-explosive barriers, and logistical hubs. Additionally, work is underway to modernize the transportation infrastructure. Airfields, bridges, and roads are being upgraded, and temporary crossings capable of supporting heavy armored vehicles are being built. Military infrastructure from the Soviet era is being restored, including ammunition depots, hangars, and dual-purpose railway lines. The Belarusian railway is being transferred to a heightened secrecy regime. Personnel reshuffles and a tightening of access controls have been recorded. All of this may indicate preparations to support a large military force on Belarusian territory or to facilitate the transit of Russian troops toward the western and southern fronts.

Reinforcement of the defense sector and a gradual orientation toward greater military preparedness. To analyze Belarus’s military expenditures, data from the national budget under the line item “National Defense” was used. When examining budget spending, it is important to consider that planned budget allocations may differ from actual expenditures due to amendments made throughout the fiscal year. There is no evidence that Belarus has attracted additional funding for national defense or used financing from alternative sources. At the same time, a comparison between Belarus’s government data and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has revealed the narrowness of defining Belarus’s military expenditures solely by the “National Defense” budget line. As a result, SIPRI data for 2022–2024 was used as the basis, and projected allocations for national defense in 2025 were calculated with adjustments based on past deviations.

According to the Ministry of Finance publications, actual spending on “National Defense” in 2022 amounted to USD 0.874 billion²³, which was 36.14% higher than planned²⁴. In 2023, actual defense spending increased by 9.05% to USD 0.953 billion. In 2024, expenditures were USD 0.966 billion, being an increase of 1.38% from last year.

Significant discrepancies emerge when comparing the published budget data with SIPRI reports over a longer period (2019–2024), not just since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. SIPRI’s figures exceed the official Belarusian government data by 30.6% to 54.38%, depending on the year. Since SIPRI applies a more comprehensive approach in calculating total military expenditures, we will use data from the Stockholm Institute to assess Belarus’s defense spending.

According to SIPRI reports, actual military spending in Belarus grew by 26.6% in 2022 compared to 2021, reaching USD 1.2 billion. This increase is likely driven by heightened military risks in the region following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. For comparison, in 2020–2021, SIPRI recorded defense spending changes of -4.1% and +10.3%, respectively. Despite the significant increase in 2022, military expenditures accounted for only 1.65% of Belarus’s GDP. In 2023, spending rose to USD 1.244 billion, equivalent to 1.73% of GDP. According to SIPRI data, Belarus’s military spending reached USD 1.491 billion in 2024 (2.04% of GDP).

Projected spending levels for 2025 are based on planned budget figures, projected deviation rates between official defense expenditures and SIPRI data, and a linear projection model. The approved budget indicators for 2025 show a further increase in defense expenditures. The government plans to raise spending under the “National Defense” category to USD 1.456 billion, a 50.8% increase compared to 2024’s level.

It is important to note that the increase in military spending in USD terms in 2025 was significantly influenced by the depreciation of the US dollar against the Belarusian ruble in the first half of 2025. Moreover, in 2024, actual national defense expenditures were lower than initially planned.

After adjusting for SIPRI data, total military spending in 2025 could reach USD 2.1050 billion, or 2.74% of GDP, assuming the average exchange rate of the national currency against the U.S. dollar will be the same as in 2024.

Overall, between 2022 and 2025, Belarus will spend approximately USD 6.044 billion on defense. Per capita military spending during this period is estimated at

²² “Khrenin Line – That Means You’ll Get Nothing.” Lukashenko Studied Defense Ministry’s Training Facility, CTV.by, 2023, <https://ctv.by/news/obshchestvo/liniya-hrenina-znachit-hren-vy-chto-poluchite-lukashenko-izuchil-uchebnyj-obuekt-minoborony>

²³ On the approval of the report on the execution of the national budget for the year 2022, 2023. https://www.minfin.gov.by/upload/budget/act/zakon_120723_278z.pdf

²⁴ On the approval of the report on the execution of the national budget for the year 2021, 2022. https://www.minfin.gov.by/upload/bp/act/zakon_311221_142z.pdf

Table 1. Belarus: Military Spending Indicators

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Estimates 2025
Defense Expenditures According to the Budget of the Republic of Belarus, Total in Billion BYN (2019–2024—Actual, 2025—Planned)	1.34	1.46	1.63	2.29	2.86	3.13	4.73
Average USD to BYN Exchange Rate for the Period (The exchange rate for 2025 was adopted at the same level as in 2024 due to its gradual strengthening in the first half of 2025 and the projected decline in the second half)	2.09	2.43	2.54	2.62	3.00	3.25	3.25
Total Defense Expenditures, Billion USD (2025—Estimate)	0.640	0.600	0.642	0.874	0.953	0.966	1.456
Year-over-Year Change in USD Equivalent, %		-6.22	6.87	36.14	9.05	1.38	50.80
Defense Expenditures According to SIPRI 2025—Author's Estimate), Billion BYN	1.88	2.10	2.41	3.16	3.73	4.88	6.83
Defense Expenditures According to SIPRI (Author's Estimate 2025), Billion USD	0.8994	0.8625	0.9514	1.2043	1.2441	1.491	2.1050
Deviation of Actual Budget Execution Data from SIPRI Data in USD (2025—Author's Estimate)	40.48	43.65	48.27	37.86	30.60	54.38	44.53
GDP (IMF Data), Billion USD	64.4	61.3	68.2	72.8	71.8	73.1	76.9
Annual Growth of Defense Spending According to SIPRI and Author's Estimate in 2025, %		-4.1	10.3	26.6	3.3	19.8	41.2
Share of Defense Spending in GDP (2019–2024—Based on SIPRI Data; 2025—Author's Estimate), %	1.40	1.41	1.39	1.65	1.73	2.04	2.74
Population, Million People (IMF Data)	9.42	9.38	9.30	9.23	9.18	9.13	9.087
Total Per Capita Defense Expenditures, USD	95.5	92.0	102.3	130.5	135.5	163.3	231.6
Total Defense Spending for 2022–2025, Billion USD							6.044
Per Capita Defense Spending for 2022–2025, USD							665.2

Source: Compiled by the author based on open data from the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus (NBRB), and the IMF.

around USD 655.2 per person.

Despite the rapid growth of Belarus's military expenditures, their actual volume remained modest in 2022-2024, even compared to a smaller country like Lithuania. The potential for increasing defense spending is constrained by the state budget limits and, presumably, the relatively low priority of these expenditures for the government. The moderate rise in defense spending amid regional tensions may be attributed to a sense of assurance in receiving military assistance from Russia if needed. Securing external loans to strengthen Belarus's military capacity is difficult due to its political situation and allied relationship with an aggressor state. Russian funding is the most likely – and essentially the only – source of borrowed resources for military projects. Nevertheless, defense spending for 2025 may increase significantly based on a comparison of official data and projected estimates calculated using SIPRI data.

A shift toward centralized resource management under emergency conditions is also underway. The Belarusian economy is effectively being transitioned to mobilization planning. In several sectors, there is evidence of militarization of production processes, expansion of manufacturing capacity, stricter control over labor discipline, and restricted access to raw materials. Restrictions are being introduced on the movement of some professionals, and secrecy is increasing at key enterprises.

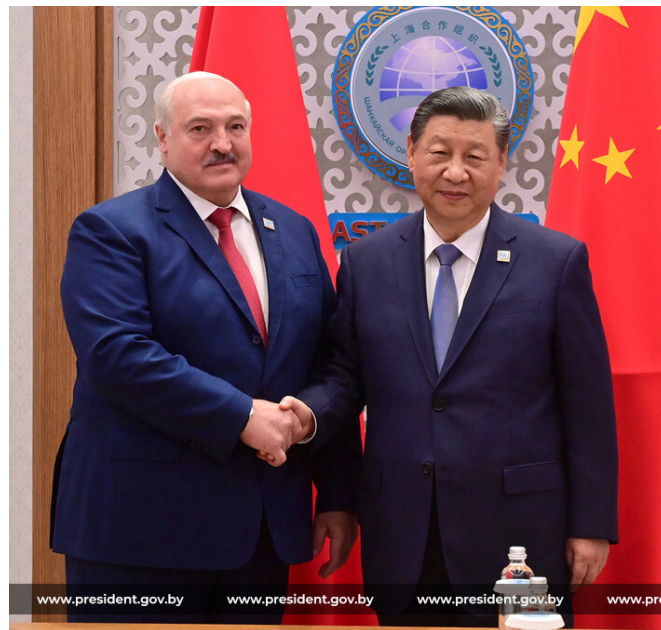
The State Authority for Military Industry reported that 2024 set a record for the number of new weapon systems – 24 new models²⁵. In total, about 4,000 new units of weapons, military and special equipment, and auxiliary gear were adopted in 2024²⁶. As of 2025, serial production of new models has begun. Priority is being given to the development of drones and electronic warfare systems. Ammunition production is also being expanded.

The Lukashenka Regime as Part of a Global Autocratic Alliance

Cooperation with China. The Lukashenka regime's cooperation with China extends beyond the economic and humanitarian spheres – notably, it also includes the military domain. On May 13, 2010, a bilateral agreement on military cooperation was signed between the defense

ministries of Belarus and China, regulating exchange visits, training, and combat preparation.

Since the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Belarus–China military cooperation has intensified. On August 17, 2023, China's Minister of Defense Li Shangfu visited Belarus and confirmed plans to strengthen military cooperation, including joint exercises. Almost a year later, in July 2024, joint anti-terrorist drills titled *Attacking Falcon* were held at the training ground in Brest.



Belarus and China also jointly produce various types of weaponry. One of the most prominent examples is the Belarusian Polonez multiple launch rocket system (MLRS), equipped with eight 301-mm Chinese A200 and A300 missiles. The Polonez system was developed in collaboration with the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology (CALT), which provided missile and electronic technology.

Another example of Belarus–China cooperation in the military sector is the JSC Aviation Technologies and Complexes – a Belarusian-Chinese joint venture and resident of the Great Stone Industrial Park. It holds license No. 03130/485, allowing it to carry out activities related to military-grade products.

²⁵ In 2024, the Belarusian Armed Forces adopted 24 new developments from the State Military-Industrial Committee, Belta, 2025. <https://belta.by/society/view/vs-belarusi-v-2024-godu-prinjali-na-vooruzhenie-24-razrabotki-goskomvoenproma-694281-2025/>

²⁶ At the board meeting the results of 2024 were reviewed and development goals for the defense sector in 2025 were set, the State Authority for Military Industry of the Republic of Belarus, 2025. https://vpk.gov.by/news/comm_news/na-kollegii-goskomvoenproma-podveli-itogi-2024-goda-i-opredelili-zadachi-razvitiya-otrasli-na-2025-g.html

The company manufactures unmanned aerial systems (UAS) based on various types of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), as well as modern ultralight manned dual-use aviation technology. Its developments include a helicopter-like aircraft that runs on regular gasoline, requires no runway, and is capable of flying in difficult weather conditions, as well as multifunctional drones.

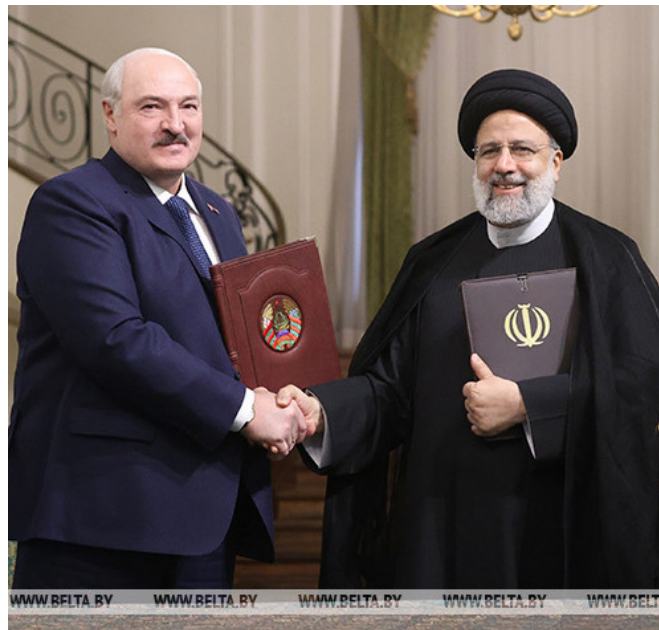
The official partner of Aviation Technologies and Complexes is the Russian company Albatros. This cooperation began in 2020. Albatros produces UAVs used by the Russian Armed Forces in the aggression against Ukraine – a fact confirmed by Ukrainian investigators. Albatros has also been linked to projects involving the assembly of Iranian drones. The Russian company Geoscan-Ufa, in partnership with Aviation Technologies and Complexes, pledged to produce and deliver 10 drones “for the needs of the ‘special military operation,’” according to the Prime Minister of the Government of Bashkortostan (a republic within the Russian Federation), Andrey Nazarov.

Chinese companies are also often used as intermediaries to bypass sanctions by supplying critical components for the manufacture of weaponry later used in the Russian war effort. For example, BELPOL found that the Chinese company Shenzhen 5G Hi-Tech Innovation Co. Limited signed contracts with Belarusian defense enterprises (Peleng, BelOMO, SALEA, LEMT, KIDMA TEK) and supplied them with components for military equipment. Chinese companies Green Cycle Energy and Morotack Technology also actively supplied critical parts to defense companies in Belarus.

Thus, Belarus–China military cooperation is systemic and multifaceted: from joint drills and personnel training to weapons production and drone manufacturing. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, this cooperation has expanded to include the participation of Chinese firms in supplying components to Belarus’s defense sector – thereby indirectly supporting Russia’s military aggression.

Cooperation with Iran. Relations between the authorities in Minsk and Tehran became more trusting when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became President of Iran in 2005. Their cooperation deepened, grounded in a shared hostility toward the West and mutual concerns about political stability and regime survival. At that time, in exchange for promises of investment and participation in oil development, Lukashenka expressed support for Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

The Lukashenka regime’s attempt to support Iran’s ballistic missile research and development in 2011 contributed to the imposition of international sanctions against Belarus. Nevertheless, military cooperation between Iran and Belarus strengthened further after both countries supported Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Since the start of Russian aggression, both have become loyal allies of Moscow.



From 2023, Belarus planned to begin production of the Shahed-136 – a drone model critical to Russia’s battlefield capabilities in Ukraine. By July 2024, Belarusian military officials unveiled the Kochevnik drone – allegedly domestically produced, yet strikingly similar to the Shahed-136. In November 2024, a high-level Belarusian military delegation visited an Iranian military university specializing in drone research and development²⁷.

Cooperation with Cuba. Belarus and Cuba maintained diplomatic relations for many years, but over the past two years, their cooperation has extended beyond trade and humanitarian exchanges, acquiring a distinctly military character. In January 2024, Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin visited Cuba, where the two sides agreed on the supply of military products. Later, it was revealed that Cuba planned to acquire Belarus-developed Polonez-M missile systems with a range of 300 km – a particularly sensitive development given Cuba’s proximity to the United States.

²⁷ Russia’s War in Ukraine Has Brought Iran and Belarus Closer Together, War on the rocks, 2025. <https://warontherocks.com/2025/02/russias-war-in-ukraine-has-brought-iran-and-belarus-closer-together/>

Military cooperation continued through a series of visits and negotiations. In April 2024, a delegation from the Cuban Air Force and Air Defense arrived in Minsk, and in the summer, Cuban Minister of the Armed Forces López visited Belarus again. The meetings included discussions of military collaboration and demonstrations of equipment, including Chinese jeeps and drones. In December, a Belarusian military delegation traveled to Cuba to discuss advancing cooperation in the areas of air force and air defense.

In January 2025, Cuba opened a military attaché office in Minsk²⁸, confirming the growing level of military alliance. Amid international isolation, Belarus gained new channels to circumvent sanctions, while Cuba received technological support to modernize its military. All of this points to the emergence of an informal military alliance that poses an increasing threat to global security.

Cooperation with the government of Field Marshal Haftar. Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Libyan National Army, visited Minsk in February 2025, demonstrating that under Lukashenka's leadership, Belarus has actively expanded military cooperation in recent years with leaders of unrecognized armed groups abroad. Despite official statements framing the visit as a civilian partnership, the involvement of the KGB and Ministry of Defense officials in the talks clearly suggests military agreements.

According to Libyan sources, key topics of the visit included strengthening Haftar's air force, including the maintenance and modernization of Russian MiG-29s, supply of spare parts, training of Libyan pilots, and cybersecurity²⁹. Libyan special forces completed advanced training in Belarus, and in the summer of 2025, a delegation from Haftar's government paid a multi-day visit to Minsk. Lukashenka-controlled media referred to it as a visit from the "government of Libya," effectively granting it official recognition³⁰. Both sides also exchanged openings of trade offices, which Haftar's side

refers to as consulates³¹. In practice, Belarus is officially engaging not with the Libyan state, but with one of the country's armed factions, thereby strengthening its position in the ongoing civil war.

Cooperation with Myanmar. Under Lukashenka, Belarus continues close military cooperation with Myanmar's military junta, whose leadership, like the regime in Belarus, stands accused of crimes against humanity. After Myanmar's 2021 military coup, contacts between the two regimes only intensified. Senior junta officials regularly visit Minsk for negotiations on arms supplies, equipment modernization, and military technology transfers. Recent visits by junta leader Min Aung Hlaing and other generals reaffirmed mutual interest in deepening military ties.

Cooperation is managed through a joint military commission that annually discusses arms deliveries, weapons production, and personnel training. Leaked data show that Belarus actively supplies the junta with weapons, receiving payment in cash and even organizing aircraft for money transfers³². At the same time, Belarus is prepared to assist Myanmar with equipment repair and the production of advanced military hardware, including technology transfers.

In addition to weapons, Belarus provides educational programs for Myanmar military specialists – Myanmar students are trained in Minsk, and arms factory technicians undergo internships. These efforts are supported by meetings with Belarus's defense enterprises such as BelOMO, which manufactures optoelectronic devices for small arms³³.

Cooperation with other autocratic regimes. On September 15, 2024, during a meeting with Vladimir Putin, Aliaksandr Lukashenka proposed establishing trilateral cooperation between Belarus, Russia, and North Korea, stressing that "there will definitely be a role" for Minsk in this arrangement. Journalists have noted

²⁸ Ministry of defense, 2025. <https://t.me/modmilby/44690>

²⁹ Libia: Haftar rafforza l'asse con la Bielorussia e rilancia la cooperazione militare con Mosca, Agenzianova, 2025. <https://www.agenzianova.com/news/libia-haftar-rafforza-lasse-con-la-bielorussia-e-rilancia-la-cooperazione-militare-con-mosca/>

³⁰ The visit of the Libyan government delegation to Belarus has concluded, Belta, 2025. <https://belta.by/politics/view/zavershilsja-vizit-livjskoj-pravitelstvennoj-delegatsii-v-belarus-724611-2025/>

³¹ Libya considers the newly opened "trading house" in Minsk as its consulate, Reform.by, 2025. <https://reform.news/livija-schitaet-otkrytyj-v-minske-torgovyj-dom-svoim-konsulstvom>

³² Belarus supplying Myanmar air defense operational command system and training defense industry personnel, Justice for Myanmar, 2025. <https://www.justiceformyanmar.org/stories/belarus-supplying-myanmar-air-defense-operational-command-system-and-training-defense-industry-personnel>

³³ Aleksandr Yefimov held a working meeting with the Prime Minister of Myanmar at the BELOMO holding site, Minprom.gov.by, 2025. <https://minprom.gov.by/aleksandr-efimov-na-ploshhadke-holdinga-belomo-provel-rabochuju-vstrechu-s-premer-ministrom-myanmar/>

that some websites in Belarus are selling goods highly resembling North Korean textiles – a direct violation of UN Security Council sanctions. Moreover, Japanese investigators discovered that BelAZ trucks are being delivered to North Korea in circumvention of sanctions³⁴, as confirmed by satellite imagery of the Russia–DPRK border³⁵.

The Lukashenka government is also actively forging ties with other authoritarian regimes. The new ambassador to Cuba, who has links to the defense industry, is expanding contacts with Nicaragua. Cooperation continues with Venezuela, Zimbabwe, and Equatorial Guinea. The leadership of the Houthi movement in Yemen, involved in regional armed conflicts, publicly congratulated Lukashenka on his “re-election” as president³⁶.

These facts illustrate that the Lukashenka regime, with support from Russia, is actively participating in the formation of an informal alliance of autocracies – regimes that often disregard international law and pose a threat to global security. With a relatively advanced industrial base and significant experience in sanctions evasion, Belarus could become a critical node in the supply chain of arms and military services, including acting as an intermediary for Russia. This cooperation opens up new avenues of influence and financial gain for Minsk, but simultaneously entangles the country in dubious international dealings. Lukashenka’s military and political alignment with autocratic regimes that violate sanctions, provoke conflicts, and shield one another from international accountability significantly increases the risks of global destabilization.

Threats and Risks

Usage of Belarus as a ground for a direct military offensive against EU and NATO member-states.

Moscow considers various scenarios of escalation with NATO, some of which include a plan to attack the Baltic States or Poland from the territory of Belarus. Russian propaganda for domestic and foreign audiences creates the image of the EU as a “new Third Reich”, which is eager to destroy Russia. This is the official position of

the MFA of Russian Federation, stating in its documents that “the Eurobureaucracy nurtured the Nazi regime in Kiev in order to unite Europe under racist and Nazi banners for a war against Russia”³⁷. A massive ideological preparation of the Russians for the war against NATO is being observed. An attack on Lithuania or Latvia in order to check Article 5 of NATO has already appeared in the public space as a plan of Moscow for the near future. In the escalation scenario, Belarus’s territory becomes crucial for the Kremlin as a ground for launching an attack on any of the Baltic States or Poland and a tactical rear in such a conflict. This role of Belarus has already been worked out in the first 2 months of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Hybrid aggression against a NATO member-state under the guise of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus. Russian propaganda constantly underlines that Belarus is an independent state and its authorities make all decisions sovereignly. Thus, using the flag of the Lukashenka regime to attack or provoke the neighbouring states can be a part of Putin’s plans for escalation in the region. For example, an attack on the border guard of Lithuania or Latvia by Russian troops under the guise of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus can be used by the Kremlin to check the possible reaction of the NATO member-states. Any armed response can be presented by the Kremlin as an attack on the so-called Union State of Russia and Belarus, which will become the reason for the usage of the Regional Group of Forces to “protect the territorial integrity of the Union State.

Another scenario is a direct invasion of Lithuania or Latvia by the Russian army under the guise of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus to interrupt the decision-making process concerning the response in NATO member-states and shift responsibility for the aggression to the Lukashenka regime. This could be accompanied by a complete refusal to recognize any Russian involvement in this operation by the official Moscow, as it happened in 2014 during the annexation of Crimea.

Usage of nuclear weapons deployed in Belarus under the guise of the Armed Forces of Belarus can be the

³⁴ North Korean firms lay groundwork to sell sanctioned textiles, boilers in Russia, NK News, 2025. https://www.nknews.org/2025/05/north-korean-firms-lay-groundwork-to-sell-sanctioned-textiles-boilers-in-russia/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

³⁵ The Sankei Shimbun, 2025. <https://www.sankei.com/article/20250317-I3RZ2BYVANILNFWCRO6NJWCC5Y/>

³⁶ President congratulates Lukashenko on re-election as President of Republic of Belarus, Saba.ye, 2025. <https://www.saba.ye/en/news3429771.htm>

³⁷ Report by the MFA of Russia «Eighty Years After the Great Victory: Europe has Once Again Fallen in the Shadow of Nazism», Ministry of international affairs, 2025. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/reports/2011501/

continuation of the previously mentioned scenarios of Russian military escalation against the NATO member-states. In case Moscow is not successful in reaching its strategic goals, it can use nuclear weapons, which is publicly stated by the Russian highest officials, like the Security Council Deputy Secretary Dmitry Medvedev. Such an attack will also be aiming to disturb the decision-making in NATO and leave possibilities for diplomatic maneuvering for the Kremlin, formally shifting responsibility to the Lukashenka regime.

Direct usage of certain troops of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus by the Russian command within the Regional Group of Forces framework for military aggression against NATO member-states. The Lukashenka regime propaganda echoes the Russian rhetoric threatening the Baltic States and preparing the people of Belarus for Moscow's war against the West. In case Russia decides to launch full-scale aggression against any NATO member states, it is not impossible to exclude the scenario of using the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus for some special activities. For example, some part of the Belarusian military can be used in the role of "good policeman" in comparison to extremely rough action by the Russian troops in order to carry out police missions in the occupied territories as well as create a picture of "noble troops, who are nice with the local people, providing them with all necessary humanitarian aid". The Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus can also be used to stage a picture of "people gladly meeting the liberators" in the territory of the Baltic States, where many Russian-speakers live. At the same time, the experience of the Lukashenka regime's military and enforcement agencies in suppressing civil activities and protests inside Belarus can be used in this case for corresponding activities in the occupied territories. However, the lack of battlefield experience as well as a dubious loyalty of the soldiers and lower officer corps will possibly stop the Russian commanders from using them on the frontline.

Conclusion

Bringing Belarus out of Russia's orbit and integrating it into the European security architecture would strip the Kremlin of its 'strategic balcony' – a critical staging ground for potential aggression against NATO member states. This would decrease the Kremlin's operative possibilities in the short and mid-term. Considering the Kremlin's official declarations, actions to diminish its military capabilities in terms of territory are a strategic interest of NATO and the EU.

However, in the current situation, the Lukashenka regime

can't be relied upon in any kind of efforts on pushing out Russian influence and military out of Belarus, as it is incapable of fulfilling any agreements, having no legal and de facto leverage on the situation in the sphere of national security and defense. At the same time, understanding the importance of Belarus for the peace in the region is crucial for guaranteeing security in Eastern Europe in the long term.

Belarus's being fully sovereign and free of Kremlin military influence also means decreasing the border with Russia to defend for NATO. In case Belarus is not controlled by Moscow, the border of the EU and Ukraine to defend if Russia again decides to use military power as a tool of diplomacy in the region will decrease almost 2 times: from 2,334 km to 1,283 km, as only the Eastern border of Belarus with Russia would have to be protected. At the same time, this will keep the borders of Poland and Lithuania safe from possible Russian massive attack, while Vilnius and Kyiv—the capitals of Lithuania and Ukraine, situated near the border with Belarus—will be definitely more protected from possible threat from the Kremlin.

Developing infrastructure to enhance deterrence against Russia should be a key component of Belarus' future transformation. The Russian early warning military facilities in Belarus should be replaced with nationally controlled systems that contribute to a broader European defense framework. The establishment of full-scale border controls and physical security measures along the border between Belarus and Russia could be well received by Belarusians if presented as a means to stop the influx of illicit goods and cross-border criminal activities linked to Russia. These measures would also help mitigate budgetary losses associated with these activities and prevent the illegal migration flows that are currently organized and facilitated by the Kremlin.

Recommendations

Strategic goal: to limit Russia's military presence in Eastern Europe by reducing Belarus's role as a staging ground for aggression, integrating Belarus-specific threat monitoring into EU and NATO planning, and supporting democratic actors in preparing for future security transformation.

01.

Recognize Belarus as a strategic military frontier by integrating Belarus-specific threats' assessments into the EU and NATO strategic planning, intelligence sharing, and defense cooperation frameworks

The EU should:

- Treat Belarus as a current operational base for Russian military and hybrid activity, not merely a potential site of escalation.
- Integrate Belarus-specific risk assessments into NATO's Strategic Concept, EU Strategic Compass, and hybrid threat analysis under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).
- Prioritize scenario planning for military escalation involving Belarus within joint EU–NATO exercises, especially in the Baltic region and Poland.

02.

Embed Belarusian Expertise in EU and NATO Security Institutions

The EU should:

- Formalise cooperation with Belarusian OSINT groups, diaspora analysts, and military defectors.
- Integrate these experts into early warning systems, military foresight units, and disinformation tracking networks under EU and NATO auspices.
- Support capacity-building for Belarusian security researchers and policy analysts to enhance long-term knowledge transfer and democratic oversight.

03.

Support Security Sector Planning for a Post-Lukashenka Transition

EU institutions should:

- Provide technical assistance to Belarusian democratic forces for drafting security sector reform (SSR) blueprints focused on:
 - Dismantling Russian military infrastructure;
 - Re-establishing national defense autonomy;
 - Aligning armed forces and border control systems with EU and NATO standards.
 - Supporting scenario-based exercises on civilian oversight, demilitarisation, and disarmament in post-authoritarian Belarus.

04.

Strengthen Belarusian Civil Society to Counter Hybrid Threats

The EU should:

- Expand core funding and technical assistance for Belarusian media, fact-checkers, watchdog groups, and civic educators focused on:
 - Countering military disinformation;
 - Documenting Kremlin-linked infiltration in Belarus's security and state structures;
 - Building grassroots resilience to authoritarian control and foreign manipulation;
 - Positioning civil society actors as early warning partners in hybrid threat detection and response.

05.

Invest in Real-Time Intelligence and Monitoring of Belarus-linked Military and Hybrid Activity

The EU must:

- Develop a dedicated threat monitoring node focused on Belarus under EU INTCEN or as part of a regional NATO capability hub.
- Expand open-source and satellite intelligence cooperation on Belarusian troop movements, defense infrastructure, and logistics chains.
- Integrate civil society and diaspora reporting into real-time intelligence fusion cells, particularly for early warning on border militarisation, cyber activity, and subversion operations.

Energy security

Belarus remains largely overlooked in the EU's energy security agenda, despite its strategic location and near-total dependence on Russian energy supplies. Among the former Soviet states, it is one of the most energy-dependent—second only to Moldova—relying almost entirely on Russia for natural gas, oil, and electricity. The Astravets nuclear power plant, financed through Russian loans, also remains under significant Russian oversight and reliant on Russian technology. In addition, Belarus does not have full ownership of its energy infrastructure. Russia owns and controls key pipelines running through Belarus, including the Yamal-Europe pipeline and Beltransgaz. It also holds shares in one of the country's two major oil refineries (Mozyr refinery complex) and continues to show interest in acquiring stakes in the second (Naftan refinery). This deep dependency creates multiple risks, from the lack of transparency in nuclear operations to the stagnation of renewable energy development and the systemic entrenchment of Belarus within Kremlin-controlled energy networks.

Furthermore, this increasing asymmetric dependence not only facilitates ongoing Russian influence over Belarus but also generates environmental and geopolitical risks for neighbouring EU member states.

A democratic and more open Belarus, by contrast, could serve as a strategic energy partner for Europe. With well-developed grid infrastructure, untapped renewable energy potential, and surplus generation capacity, Belarus has the potential to contribute to Ukraine's energy recovery, export biomass and green hydrogen, and support the stability of the Baltic energy system. Integrating Belarus into the European energy space would not only reduce Moscow's leverage in the region but also enhance the EU's overall energy resilience and sustainability.

Analysis of the Energy Mix of Belarus

Availability and Limitations of Data

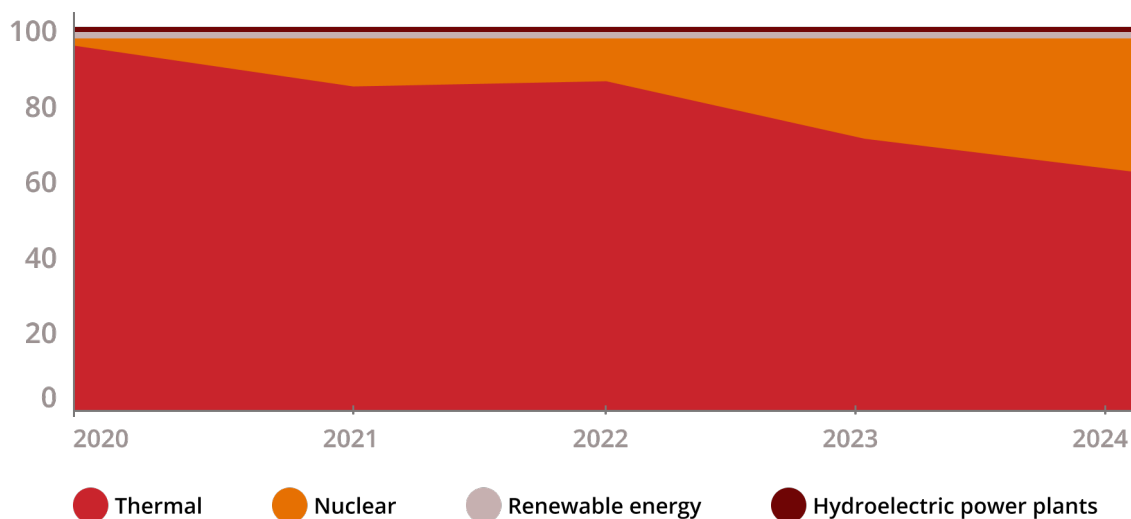
Since 2021, much of Belarus's official statistical data has become largely unavailable. Consequently, assessment of the current state of the country's energy sector is limited to publicly available data, which may result in an incomplete or potentially distorted understanding of the actual conditions.

The main energy indicators of Belarus, for which data continues to be published regularly, are presented in the table below:

The main form of final energy consumption in Belarus is heat energy (around 8 million tonnes of oil equivalent). Approximately 4 million tonnes of oil equivalent are consumed in the form of natural gas, diesel fuel, electricity, and other fossil fuels. The consumption of renewable energy sources amounts to about 1 million tonnes of oil equivalent³⁸.

Parameter	Unit	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Energy intensity	Kg c.e/constant mln BLR 2005	365	388,1	364,0	362,2	355,8
Gross energy consumption	Kt c.e.	37058,85	40310,52	35958,51	37174,09	37970,74
Electricity consumption	Kg c.e//	38 186	40 548	38 600	41 100	43 000
Natural gas consumption	Mln m ³	18 963	20 059	18 700	17 000	17 200
Electricity generation at NPP	GWh	341	5780	4683	11732	15 700
Electricity consumption by electric transport	GWh1	11	41	73	01	11
Electricity used for heating	GWh	273	475	665	931	273
Crude oil production	Mln t	1710	1 737	1 810	1 887	1 938

Gross electricity generation in Belarus (share of energy types)



³⁸ Energy Balance of the Republic of Belarus, Belsat, 2021. https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/realny-sector-ekonomiki/energeticheskaya-statistika/statisticheskie-izdaniya/index_39985/

Electricity Sector

Current situation

Until 2020, around 55% of electricity in Belarus was generated by combined heat and power plants (CHPPs), about 42% by condensing thermal power plants, and roughly 3% by renewable energy sources.

In 2020, the first unit of the nuclear power plant (NPP) was launched. The NPP consists of 2 units of the Russian NPP 2006 design with a capacity of 1200 MW each. The construction was carried out using a Russian loan. It is expected that once operating at full capacity, the NPP will generate around 18 billion kWh, or about 40% of total electricity consumption³⁹. However, this mode of operation remains out of reach due to periodic emergency shutdowns and longer-than-expected planned maintenance periods.

Currently, around 35% of electricity is generated by the NPP, which is designed to operate constantly at nominal capacity, and 55% is generated by CHPPs, which operate depending on the demand for heat energy and cannot adjust their capacity freely. About 90% of electricity is produced by power stations that cannot vary their output, which has led to an oversupply of electricity. This problem is being addressed through the construction of electric boilers and by incentivising electricity use for heating purposes. To support this, a special tariff for the Belarusian population has been introduced, which covers only about 15%⁴⁰ of the cost of electricity production.

In this context, the Belarusian authorities are seriously considering building a second nuclear power plant or adding a third unit to the existing one. Construction is expected to be carried out using the same technology, also at the expense of a Russian loan. The most interested party in this project from the Russian side is State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom, since their interest lies in the construction of units without

taking into account the possibilities of their further operation. The construction of additional units without the corresponding growth in electricity consumption may lead to the need to export electricity (possibly even with significant losses), which will create additional dependence of Belarus on Russia in the area of electricity trade.

Difficulties in balancing electricity supply and demand significantly limit the potential for variable renewable energy sources (RES), such as solar and wind power. To restrict new RES capacities, Decree No. 357⁴¹ dated September 24, 2019, "On Renewable Energy Sources," was adopted. It introduced capacity quotas for RES construction. For the period 2021–2025, these quotas were set at zero. For the period 2025–2029, the total quota has been set at 43 MW⁴².

Development

The development of the energy sector as a whole is aimed at expanding the use of electricity. This is evident from the Comprehensive Plan for the Development of the Electric Power Sector until 2025⁴³, the Program for Increasing Electricity Consumption for Heating Needs⁴⁴, and the efforts to promote the use of electric transport. Overall, this aligns with the EU policy trends toward the electrification of final energy consumption.

However, despite similar trends, the underlying reasons behind these choices differ significantly. In the EU, electrification is pursued to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by replacing fossil fuels with electricity generated from renewable energy sources.

In Belarus, the current trend is driven by an electricity surplus following the launch of the second unit of the nuclear power plant. The country lacks the technical ability to export electricity to any neighbouring country except Russia, and exports to Russia are not taking place because electricity prices there are lower than in Belarus.

³⁹ The Belarusian NPP has generated over 40 billion kWh of electricity, Ministry of Energy, 2025 https://t.me/Minenergo_by/2947

⁴⁰ Electricity Tariffs for the Population in Belarus, Myfin.by, 2025. <https://myfin.by/wiki/term/tarify-na-elektroenergiyu-dlya-naseleniya-v-belarusi>

⁴¹ Presidential Decree of the Republic of Belarus of September 24, 2019 No. 357 "On Renewable Energy Sources", Pravo.by. <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=P31900357&p1=1>

⁴² Belarus Has Set Quotas for New RES Installations for 2025–2029, Belta, 2025. <https://belta.by/economics/view/v-belarusi-ustanovleny-kvoty-na-sozdanie-ustanovok-po-ispolzovaniju-vie-v-2025-2029-godah-625315-2024/>

⁴³ Decree on the Approval of the Comprehensive Development Plan for the Electric Power Sector until 2025, Considering the Launch of the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant, Pravo.by, 2016. <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=C21600169>

⁴⁴ Belarus Adopts Program to Increase Household Electricity Consumption, Belta, 2021, <https://belta.by/economics/view/v-belarusi-utverzhdena-programma-po-uvlicheniju-potreblenija-naseleniem-elektroenergii-424316-2021/>

As a result, to balance electricity supply and maintain system reliability, Belarus has had to construct electric boilers to absorb the excess electricity.

Despite this situation, there are plans to build another nuclear power plant or a third unit at the existing one. However, the construction of the facility could seriously challenge the stability of the power system unless sufficient new demand is created, with much of it potentially requiring artificial stimulation.

The focus on nuclear energy discourages competition from other energy sources. Currently, there are strict limitations on the construction of new power-generating facilities. From 2021 to 2024, such construction was entirely banned, which sharply contrasts with EU trends.

A similar dynamic is seen in energy system governance. Instead of developing market mechanisms and flexible systems, Belarus is moving toward deeper state-regulated integration and consolidation. In 2019, the independent system operator RUP “ODU” was closed, and its functions were transferred to the state-owned vertically integrated utility, the State Production Association of Electric Power Industry (Belenergo). As a result, even the role of system operator is no longer institutionally separated from other activities. There are no visible signs of reversing this trend or recognition of the negative consequences it may cause.

Heat Energy Sector

Current situation

Combined heat and power plants (CHPPs), which produce both electricity and heat, account for approximately 55% of total heat production. The remaining heat is generated by boiler houses operated by public utilities and industrial enterprises.

A significant issue is the subsidisation of heat consumption, which reaches up to 80%⁴⁵ of the actual cost of energy for households. These costs are partially covered by the state budget and partially offset by higher tariffs imposed on enterprises.

Development

Heat generation at CHP plants is likely to remain unchanged in the near term, as it is currently the cheapest source of heat energy and enables cross-subsidisation between heat and electricity. However, in

the longer term and the context of decarbonization, CHP plants pose a significant challenge for energy systems, as they cannot transition to renewable energy sources.

The unit capacities of such plants are quite high – Minsk CHP-4, for example, has an installed capacity of over 1 GW and is one of the largest in the EU region. Transitioning such large facilities to renewable fuels such as biomass or biogas currently appears unrealistic. Decommissioning them would require not only replacing generation capacity with renewables, but also securing heat production via solar collectors, electric heating, or heat pumps. This would, in turn, necessitate significant upgrades and expansion of the grid infrastructure in cities.

In heat supply from boiler houses, the trend of converting heat sources to biomass appears to continue, although the pace of replacement has slowed considerably due to restrictions on investments from international financial institutions. However, the economic viability and profitability of such projects still support these efforts. Thus, Belarus's heat energy sector is currently moving in line with European trends toward increased use of biomass, albeit at a much slower pace.

At the same time, biomass development is competing with two other trends:

1. Continued gasification, as gas equipment remains much more convenient for consumers.
2. Expansion of peat use. This direction is promoted by the Ministry of Energy, although it is mainly aimed at expanding peat use at large industrial facilities (e.g., cement plants) rather than among the general population. This is primarily due to the inconvenience of using peat as a heating fuel for private homes.

Biomass

Current situation

By 2022, a number of international projects had been implemented in Belarus to convert boiler houses to biomass. After 2022, these projects were halted, temporarily suspending the transition to biomass. Additionally, in 2022, sanctions were imposed on Belarusian forest industry products. Until that year, Belarus had been producing around 600 thousand tons of wood pellets annually, almost all of which were exported to the EU.

⁴⁵ “On Amendments to the Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus of December 30, 2013 No. 1166”

Currently, various measures are being taken to increase domestic consumption of fuel pellets. A government-funded program is being developed for the construction of pellet-fired boiler houses. Households are being compensated for the purchase of suitable boilers and the acquisition of wood pellets.

Development

In recent years, there has been a noticeable push to stimulate the consumption of *wood pellets*. This trend stems from the significant production capacities that had been commissioned before 2020, originally intended to supply the EU market. However, sanctions on the export of wood products have led to the cessation of pellet

exports, and, as a result, mechanisms are now being created to stimulate domestic consumption of wood pellets in Belarus.

Although these support measures are not sustainable and entail a number of negative side effects, the overall trends in heat supply partly align with those in the EU. That said, the underlying drivers behind these trends are fundamentally different. In the Belarusian context, the promotion of pellet consumption may prove unsustainable due to the high cost of pellets. If the government loses the ability to maintain low, subsidised pellet tariffs, this trend is likely to reverse, resulting in a sharp decline in consumption.



Oil Refining

Current situation

Oil refining in Belarus is primarily represented by two oil refineries – the Naftan and Mazyr refineries – which together have a processing capacity of up to 24 million tons of crude oil per year. All refined oil comes from Russia. Naftan is wholly owned by Belarus. The Mazyr Oil Refinery's ownership structure includes the private company Slavneft, which is owned by the Russian oligarch Gutseriev. The rest is owned by Belarus either directly or through other state-owned companies. There is currently no evidence of any desire to gain

control over Belarusian oil refineries, but such desires may arise in the future. To meet domestic demand for petroleum products, approximately 8 million tons are refined annually. The surplus is exported. There is no exact data on the direction of oil product exports. From the available data, it is known that some oil products are delivered by land to accessible countries (possibly to Azerbaijan and Turkey). Some are reloaded in Russian ports and delivered by sea. In this case, the recipient can be any country.

After the EU banned the purchase of petroleum products from Belarusian refineries and prohibited their transit through EU countries, exports were redirected to Russian

ports. This significantly increased export costs and reduced the profitability of oil refining. In 2024, both refineries operated at a loss.

Development

The future of Belarusian oil refineries remains uncertain. Following the loss of access to cheap Russian crude oil, their economic prospects have become unclear. This uncertainty is primarily driven by numerous unknown variables: what conditions will apply to oil transit through EU countries, and whether it will be possible to implement the necessary infrastructure projects, such as oil pipelines or port terminals.

There is also high uncertainty regarding markets: will it be possible to find buyers for petroleum products in distant countries if crude oil is purchased at global market prices, especially considering high transportation costs? Relations with Ukraine and the potential resumption of petroleum product exports to its market will also play a key role.

All of this is further complicated by the global decline in demand for petroleum products due to the energy transition and the electrification of transport.

Nevertheless, refinery management is actively trying to mitigate these risks. A modernisation program has been completed recently, significantly improving processing efficiency and increasing the output of light petroleum products (gasoline and diesel). The next step in the development of the Mazyr Refinery is the construction of a polypropylene production complex, as part of an effort to move into petrochemicals and secure market positions in anticipation of a shrinking petroleum product market.

Gas supply

Natural gas is the main type of energy consumed in Belarus. In 2019, gas consumption reached 20 billion cubic meters (bcm), but after the launch of the nuclear power plant, consumption decreased to 17.2 bcm, of which about 4 bcm of gas is final consumption, and about 1.6 bcm is gas consumption by chemical production. The rest is consumed for the production of heat and electrical energy. The share of gas in the production of heat and electrical energy is 78%, which indicates the high dependence of the energy complex as a whole on a reliable gas supply.

All gas is supplied from Russia via several gas pipelines.

Belarus receives Russian gas at special prices. Over the past 5 years, gas starting prices for Belarus have

remained at approximately 128.5 US dollars per thousand cubic meters. This is significantly different from world prices. It is the cheaper gas prices relative to market prices that represent the greatest dependence of the Belarusian energy sector on Russia.

Until 2022, natural gas transit was carried out through Belarus via the Yamal-Europe (capacity about 33 bcm) gas pipeline. Since then, there has been no transit.

Belarus does not have any significant plans for the development of the gas sector. The available capacities are sufficient to meet all needs. The gasification of Belarusian settlements (small towns, villages) has been going on for a long time and is expected to continue. The Belarusian authorities are trying to accelerate the creation of a common gas market with Russia (to ensure equal prices), but Russia is not interested in this, and the process has not been moving forward for many years.

Energy Efficiency

Current situation

Belarus has a Department for Energy Efficiency (which is officially a part of the State Committee for Standardization of the Republic of Belarus, also known as Gosstandart), whose main responsibilities include implementing energy efficiency policies and promoting the development of renewable energy sources (RES). Most initiatives for deploying renewables are financed through the “Energy Efficiency” program managed by this department. However, the mechanisms and tools used to improve energy efficiency are primarily administrative in nature, lacking broad market-based incentives or grassroots initiatives. This approach delivered strong results in the 2000s and early 2010s, but since 2015, progress in energy efficiency has largely stagnated. As a result, Belarus currently has an energy efficiency level higher than the global average, yet further improvements have become limited under the existing system.

Development

One of the key reasons for the stagnation in energy efficiency growth is the limited potential for endlessly modernising existing technologies. Further improvements now depend on structural changes in the economy, as well as the introduction of new technologies in electricity and heat production. However, all of these areas are artificially constrained in Belarus.

Structural transformation of the economy is associated with political concerns, as it relates to societal groups that were involved in the 2020 protests. Additionally, the

expansion of nuclear power instead of renewable energy sources contributes to an increase in the energy intensity of the economy.

As a result, the prospects of reaching global average energy efficiency levels are rather low. It is more likely that in the coming years, energy intensity will remain unchanged.



Personnel and Community

Current situation

To fully understand the situation in Belarus's energy sector, it is not enough to analyse only the technical aspects. It is equally important to consider the working conditions.

After the 2020 protests, many people were dismissed from their jobs. In every organisation, Telegram channels were created to disseminate state propaganda. Regular meetings are organised with employees featuring representatives from law enforcement agencies (police, prosecutor's office, KGB, etc.) and various ideological officials, during which ideological indoctrination is conducted.

Since 2020, the only remaining option for international cooperation has been engagement with representatives from Russia or other former Soviet countries. Collaboration on international projects with Western countries has become impossible. As a result, local professionals are losing awareness of global energy trends and are becoming increasingly convinced that it is impossible to operate an energy system without oil and gas, in the case of Belarus, without Russian oil and gas.

Development

No steps are being taken to improve qualifications or to create incentives for the most successful and skilled professionals, and there are no signs that such measures will be implemented in the future. The education system

as a whole (including the training of energy professionals) is increasingly oriented toward ideological instruction, while less and less attention is paid to the quality of training.

International exchanges and professional competitions are increasingly limited to cooperation with Russian institutions. The situation is further aggravated by the dissolution of scientific energy centers in Russia, which previously played a key role in advancing energy transition and sustainable development. Their absence significantly reduces the likelihood of such issues being raised in the context of joint engagements.

At the same time, this is one of the few areas where Belarus's democratic forces can still have an influence by creating high-quality technical content, spreading information about the real state of technologies globally, and highlighting the consequences of energy policy decisions. This also includes seminars or educational courses in areas that are currently ignored in Belarusian university curriculum (such as the functioning of energy markets, for example).

Risks/Threats

The isolated state of Belarus's energy system from all neighbouring countries except Russia also significantly increases the risks and threats that Belarus may pose to its neighbours.

Among direct energy-related threats, Belarus could potentially disrupt oil transit, but this would also be an unfavourable move for Russia, making such a scenario highly unlikely at this time.

There is no natural gas transit through Belarus except for deliveries to Kaliningrad Oblast. The electricity system is also synchronised only with Russia.

Nevertheless, energy infrastructure in Belarus may pose indirect threats to neighbouring countries. For example, unplanned shutdowns have occurred at the nuclear power plant. The most recent one took place in December 2024, but the Belarusian authorities did not officially report the shutdown. Instead, information about the outage first appeared in the media. Thus, if there is a potential risk of radioactive material release into the air or water, Belarus may not inform neighbouring countries about such incidents.

Work is also beginning on the development of radioactive waste storage facilities. The site has not yet been selected, but if it is located near the EU border, it may negatively affect areas adjacent to neighbouring

countries. There could be potential environmental risks through the pollution of the border rivers and lakes.

There is also a risk associated with Belarusian hydropower plants, which are located on the Daugava (Western Dvina) and Neman (Nemunas) rivers. Accidents at these facilities could damage the dam and cause flooding in downstream areas, potentially affecting populations in Lithuania and Latvia. However, these plants are relatively new, and major damage would most likely occur only in the event of military conflict. Intentional water releases would primarily harm Belarusian cities and residents.

Among the threats Belarus itself may face, the most significant are potential risks from Russia could, for example, exert significant influence through price increases for oil and gas or by restricting its supply. In addition, Belarus currently exports oil products via Russian infrastructure, access to which could also be restricted.

Conclusion

Despite current limitations, the Belarusian energy system holds significant potential. In the event of political change, several key areas could offer meaningful opportunities for cooperation with the European Union, including:

Wood Pellet and Biomass Production: Before 2022, Belarus planned to build capacities for producing up to 1 million tons of pellets per year, aiming for exports to the EU. This field could be further developed, and Belarus could become a significant supplier of carbon-neutral fuel to EU countries.

Wind and Solar Energy Development: After the lifting of

the legislative ban on renewable energy sources, Belarus can actively build solar and wind power stations. With the possibility of trading electricity with neighbouring countries, Belarus could sell green electricity. Given the overproduction of electricity at the NPPs, this green electricity could be sold at relatively low prices.

Hydrogen Production: Part of the overproduction of electricity could be directed toward the production of low-carbon “green” hydrogen, which could then be transported to EU markets via existing gas transport networks.

Capacity Reserves and Cross-Border Power Lines: Belarus has significant reserves of power capacity and cross-border lines with Ukraine. This could allow the use of Belarus’s energy capacity to meet electricity demand in Ukraine after the war.

Developed Electricity System: Belarus has a well-developed electrical system with strong connections to all neighbouring countries. The system is not synchronised with the EU’s system, but there are power lines with all countries. Synchronising Belarus’s energy system with the EU’s system would enhance the reliability of the systems in Lithuania, Latvia, and Ukraine through expanded cross-border energy transmission and emergency support.

Gas Transport System: Belarus’s gas transport system can create additional connections between Lithuania and Poland and enable direct gas transport between Ukraine and the Baltic countries. Belarus’s oil transport system could be used to supply oil to Ukraine via Baltic ports. Free capacities at Belarusian refineries could supply the Ukrainian oil products market after the war ends, and the transit of oil via the Odesa-Brody route, and further via the “Druzhba” pipeline in reverse mode, would offer economic benefits for Ukrainian oil transport companies.



Recommendations

Strategic goal: to reduce Belarus's structural energy dependencies and prepare for a future democratic transition by enhancing energy system resilience, aligning regulatory frameworks with EU standards, and enabling integration into the European energy market.

To achieve this goal EU should:

01.

Develop a plan for integration into the European Energy System

The European Union should begin to consider Belarus as a potential future partner within its broader regional energy framework. This means factoring Belarus into long-term energy planning scenarios. Belarus's extensive grid infrastructure, substantial biomass resources, and surplus electricity generation could play a meaningful role in supporting the EU's energy resilience, including:

- Contributing to Ukraine's energy recovery;
- Enhancing the reliability and connectivity of the Baltic electricity network;
- Providing flexible capacity reserves in regional contingency planning.

02.

Adapt EU energy infrastructure for future connectivity

As the EU upgrades and expands its internal energy infrastructure, it should proactively design for future interoperability with Belarus. Anticipating the technical and logistical requirements for cross-border energy exchanges will accelerate post-transition cooperation. Specific measures should include:

- Planning for reverse gas flows and upgrades to existing pipeline infrastructure;
- Expanding electricity interconnections between Belarus and neighboring EU countries;
- Preparing for potential oil transit routes, particularly those linking the Baltic states with Ukraine.

03.

Accelerate legal preparedness and market alignment

In cooperation with Belarusian democratic forces, the EU should initiate technical consultations and legal modelling to align Belarus's future energy governance with the EU energy acquis. This preparatory work would involve:

- Developing model legislation in areas such as energy market liberalisation, unbundling, and transparency;
- Designing phased transition plans for energy regulation, with timelines for adoption post-transition;
- Coordinating with EU bodies such as DG ENERGY, ACER, and ENTSO-E to provide technical assistance and regulatory guidance.

04.

Support energy transparency and professional capacity

To counter state disinformation and institutional decay in Belarus's energy sector, the EU should invest in building a knowledge-based, transparent, and professionally competent energy community. Recommended actions include:

- Promoting access to independent data and media that monitor Belarus's energy system and environmental risks;
- Supporting educational programmes and technical training for Belarusian energy professionals, including topics such as renewable integration, grid operation, and sustainability
- Launching Belarus-focused knowledge exchange initiatives, hosted by EU academic and research institutions, to restore awareness of global energy trends.

05.

Promote renewables and decentralisation readiness

The EU should prepare a roadmap for post-transition support of renewable energy and decentralised systems in Belarus which should aim to:

- Remove legal and regulatory barriers to the deployment of wind, solar, and other renewable sources;
- Enable the development of distributed generation models, such as rooftop solar, prosumer schemes, and community energy projects;
- Expand the use of biomass in a sustainable and locally accountable manner.

06.

Anticipate emergency scenarios and risk mitigation

Given Belarus's ongoing integration with Russian-controlled infrastructure and the poor transparency of its energy sector, the EU must enhance its preparedness for emergency scenarios. Recommended actions include:

- Expanding EU monitoring of nuclear safety in Belarus, with a focus on the Astravets NPP and future radioactive waste facilities;
- Assessing environmental spillover risks from hydropower installations and hazardous energy infrastructure near EU borders;
- Developing regional contingency plans for blackouts, reactor incidents, and infrastructure sabotage, including communication protocols with affected Member States and coordination with EU civil protection mechanisms.



Information Security

Belarus has recently emerged as a key platform for hostile information operations targeting the European Union. Since adopting the Concept [Doctrine] of Information Security in 2019, the Lukashenko regime has built a centralised system for propaganda, censorship, cyber operations, and narrative control – used both to suppress its own society and to project hybrid threats abroad. These operations often align with Russian objectives but are increasingly autonomous, aimed at destabilising societies, manipulating migration, and undermining democratic institutions.

For the EU, Belarus represents a distinct and persistent threat in the information domain. Its proximity, strategic alignment with Moscow, and hostility toward democratic values demand tailored responses. Meanwhile, treating Belarus solely through the lens of Russian influence risks overlooking specific patterns of disinformation, transnational repression, and cyber interference. An effective EU strategy must integrate Belarus into its information security strategy and engage Belarusian civil society as a partner in building regional digital resilience.



General context

Since 2020, the Belarusian authorities have systematically reinforced information security: new legal acts have been adopted, a centralised management vertical has been established, and the information space has been increasingly aligned with the logic of hybrid confrontation. Domestically, this is manifested in harsh repression; externally, in propaganda attacks on neighbouring EU countries, instrumentalization of migration for political purposes and cross-border destabilization, as well as pressure on the Belarusian diaspora.

The Lukashenka regime's informationsphere, rather than functioning independently, is integrated into a broader political, technological, and ideological alliance with Russia. However, the Belarusian regime still retains a degree of autonomy and flexibility, and is gaining experience in its own information operations. For the European Union, as well as Belarusian society and the diaspora, this represents a persistent yet under-recognized hybrid threat.

The EU's approach to information threats from the Lukashenka regime is vulnerable in two key ways:

1. ***Belarus remains a secondary focus*** in EU policy documents, often treated merely as an extension of the Russian threat. As a result, the regime's information and cyber operations – and the

experience gained from them – are not integrated into the EU's early warning systems or into its legal and platform-based response mechanisms.

2. ***The specific nature of the regime is overlooked*** – a digital dictatorship dependent on the Kremlin, yet with its own agency. This leads to a lack of precision in EU policy, which often fails to distinguish between the regime, state institutions, and Belarusian society.

Therefore, an effective EU strategy must distinguish:

- ***The Lukashenka regime*** – the source and organizer of hostile policy towards the West.
- ***Belarusian state bodies*** – controlled by the regime and used as tools to implement its policies.
- ***Belarusian society*** – under repression and manipulation, including propaganda; a potential ally of the EU in the region.
- ***Independent media and civic initiatives in exile*** – resilient to propaganda and capable of meaningful partnership.

Failing to recognize these distinctions reduces the political effectiveness of the EU. Pressure ends up being excessive on society and insufficient on the actual source of the threat – the regime and the Kremlin.



The Information Vertical and Its Associated Threats

System Structure

Since 2019, the Lukashenka regime has been building a centralized system of information and ideological policy that combines functions of cybersecurity, ideological

control, narrative management, and the dissemination of disinformation. This structure is characterized by its hierarchical complexity and integration into the national security apparatus. By 2025, it can be seen as a coordinated vertical for managing the information space, where each level, from analytical to repressive, possesses its own powers, resources, and decision-making capacity (see Table 3).

Table 3

Level	Units	Functions
Political strategy	A. Lukashenka (as president). Presidential Press Service. Presidential Administration. State Security Council Secretariat (SSCS).	Defining policy goals and directions. Drafting directives and concepts. Overseeing media policy.
Monitoring and analysis	Information-Analytical Directorate of the SSCS. Belarusian Institute for Strategic Research (BISR). National Press Center. Academy of Public Administration under the aegis of the President.	Media landscape analysis. Threat identification. Methodological support.
Operational control and oversight	Operations and Analysis Center (OAC)—NCOT, beCloud, NCEU. State Security Committee (KGB). Ministry of Internal Affairs. Ministry of Information.	Technical monitoring. Traffic filtering. Blocking.
Execution and dissemination	Agencies: BelTA. Media: National State Television and Radio Company, ONT, STV, Belarus Segodnya Publishing House, etc. New media: Telegram channels, TikTok projects, etc.	Content production and distribution. Narrative adaptation.
Special information and hybrid operations	Ministry of Defense hacker group (UNC1151), cyber-intelligence of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, information warfare units of the Internal Troops.	Cyber operations, disinformation, and media manipulation.

To understand the logic of the vertically organized information sphere, three key institutions can be identified that illustrate the mechanism and logic of control that flows directly from Lukashenka.

01. The Presidential Press Service (headed by Natalya Eismant).

In addition to its representative role, this service plays a crucial part in the operational coordination of media. It serves as a channel for informal directives from Lukashenka to state media. It facilitates the manual

implementation of information and ideological tasks.

Its key functions are:

- Transmitting personal instructions to editorial offices, hosts, and experts outside official channels.
- Urgent coordination of information narratives in crises.
- Controlling content of broadcasts, selecting speakers, and shaping program structure.

02. The Operations and Analysis Center (OAC).

As the technical and legal core of digital control directly subordinate to Lukashenka, the Center acts as the administrator of Belarus's internet space.

Its key functions are:

- Managing the .by domain and internet operator beCloud.
- Centralized traffic control through the National Traffic Exchange Center (NCOT).
- Blocking websites and throttling internet traffic.
- Certifying cryptographic protection tools.

03. The Belarusian Institute for Strategic Research (BISR).

BISR acts as an analytical think tank reporting to the Presidential Administration. In information policy, it monitors media trends and develops recommendations for information and ideological strategy.

Its key functions are:

- Providing analytical support to Lukashenka, the Presidential Administration, the Security Council, etc.
- Assisting in drafting key strategic documents (e.g., the National Security Concept, Directive No. 12).
- Offering methodological guidance to media, universities, ideological institutions, and heads of state enterprises.
- Supporting IT monitoring systems, including InfoMetrix (for internet media analysis) and MediaMetrix (for television viewership analysis).

Thus, the information sphere of the Lukashenka regime combines institutional centralization and direct subordination with a certain degree of operational autonomy. It is reinforced by a repressive apparatus and IT control, and relies on the capabilities of the security services, ideological enforcement, and constant attention at the highest political level.

Political and Doctrinal Foundations

In addition to institutions, the system of information control in Belarus is supported by a detailed political and doctrinal framework, enshrined in national concepts, directives, and military strategy. Since 2019, the regime has shifted from ad hoc responses to long-term policy programming (up to 10 years), in which the regime's interest in controlling interpretations of reality takes precedence over human rights, freedom of expression, national identity, and international obligations.

The key components of this framework are four official documents: the Doctrine of Information Security of the Republic of Belarus (2019), the National Security Concept of the Republic of Belarus (2024), the Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus (2024), and the Directive No. 12 "On Implementing the Foundations of the Ideology of the Belarusian State" (2025).

- ***The Concept [Doctrine] of Information Security of the Republic of Belarus (2019).*** This document introduced the concept of "information sovereignty" as the "inalienable and exclusive supremacy of the state's right to independently determine the rules of possession, use and disposal of national information resources, implement an independent external and internal state information policy, [and] form a national information infrastructure"⁴⁶. In practice, it laid the foundation for excessive state control over media and information after 2020, including internet monitoring, content blocking and filtering, and the criminalization of participation in independent media projects.
- ***The National Security Concept of the Republic of Belarus (2024).*** Approved by the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, this concept institutionalized the ideological framing of threats. It established a principle of symmetry, whereby any external influence—from sanctions to media publications – is treated as inherently hostile and subject to administrative, forceful, or informational countermeasures. It designates as threats: "destructive informational influence on individuals, society, especially youth and state institutions," "undermining national cultural and spiritual traditions," and "distortion of historical truth and memory" (paragraphs 28–29). National interests are defined as the "preservation of national identity," "strengthening of moral and spiritual values of the

⁴⁶ paragraph 8. Doctrine of Information Security, Pravo.by, 2019. <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=P219s0001>. In English: https://un.mfa.gov.by/docs/doctrine_of_information_security_of_the_republic_of_belarus.pdf

Belarusian people,” “development of cultural space,” and “protection of historical memory about the heroic past” (paragraphs 8, 15)⁴⁷.

- **The Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus (2024).** Also approved by the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly, this document views the information domain as an integral part of national defense and a potential theater of operations. It identifies “information confrontation” as a core element of strategic deterrence (paragraphs 33.5–33.6, 106.5, 106.11). It emphasizes the need to counter destructive psychological influence on the population and state personnel (paragraphs 70.18, 71.14) and affirms the right to use all means, including force, to neutralize threats, including those of an informational and technical nature (paragraphs 60, 61.10).
- **Directive No. 12 “On Implementing the Foundations of the Ideology of the Belarusian State” (2025).** This directive enshrines the regime’s ideology as the institutional framework of its repressive policies, establishing the normative basis for censorship, ideological indoctrination, and administrative pressure against political pluralism. It mandates the creation of a centralized ideological hierarchy and prescribes unified approaches to ideological work across government agencies, educational institutions, media, the military, and even private enterprises (paragraphs 2.3, 3, 3.1). The directive formalizes the so-called “Foundations of Ideology” as the regime’s core document (paragraph 1), emphasizing support for the “presidential system of governance” and identity based on “traditional moral and spiritual values.”⁴⁸

In effect, this political and legal foundation establishes a consistent hierarchy: Ideology and concepts → Normative regulation → Administrative enforcement

→ Repressive and technical measures. Based on this framework, amendments were made to the “Law on Mass Media” (2021), granting the Ministry of Information the right to block websites and networks without court approval and to conduct other forms of “rapid response to internal and external information threats⁴⁹.” On this basis, dozens of websites were shut down, and independent media were criminalized⁵⁰.

Propaganda Expansion

As of 2025, the combined Belarusian budget for information policy and media totals \$66 million, including a separate \$11 million allocated to the Union State media holding, which aims to amplify pro-Russian narratives⁵¹. Projects under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and the security services are funded through their respective institutional budgets.

Belarusian state media and affiliated outlets broadcast coordinated messaging. These often replicate Russian narratives, adapt them to the regional context, or develop parallel storylines. It should be noted that despite external similarities, the interests of the Lukashenka regime may differ from those of the Kremlin. While Putin pursues global geopolitical goals, Lukashenka is primarily focused on the regime’s survival. This objective shapes the logic of his communication system.



⁴⁷ National Security Concept, Pravo.by, 2024. <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=P924v0005>.

⁴⁸ Directive of the President of the Republic of Belarus No. 12 of April 9, 2025, “On Implementing the Foundations of the Ideology of the Belarusian State” https://president.gov.by/fp/v1/630/document-thumb__64630__original/64630.1744203438.7b044f240f.pdf

⁴⁹ Draft Law “On Amendments to the Laws on Mass Media”, Council of the Republic, 2021. <https://sovrep.gov.by/ru/zakony-ru/view/proekt-zakona-respubliki-belarus-ob-izmenenii-zakonov-po-voprosam-sredstv-massovoj-informatsii-515/#:~:text=Законопроект%20направлен%20на%20обеспечение%20защиты,внешние%20и%20внутренние%20информационные%20угрозы>

⁵⁰ Freedom on the net - Belarus, Freedom House, 2024 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-net/2024#:~:text=block%20the%20new%20foreign,by%20launched%20a%20successor%20to>

⁵¹ 1) Law of the Republic of Belarus “On the National [Republican] Budget for 2025” No. 48-3 of December 13, 2024. Annex 3 to the Law of the Republic of Belarus “On the National [Republican] Budget for 2025”.
2) “Mezentsev: 1 Billion Rubles Allocated for the Union Media Holding”, Soyuz.by, 2025. <https://soyuz.by/novosti-soyuznogo-gosudarstva/mezentsev-na-soyuznyy-mediaholding-assignuyut-1-mlrd-rublej>

Key Propaganda Narratives

The regime's propaganda targets both domestic and international audiences, with different goals for each. Domestically, the core goals are to preserve the Lukashenka regime, cultivate societal loyalty to it, and suppress alternative development paths.

Externally, three main objectives can be identified:

1. Undermining the project of a democratic Belarus within the EU, discrediting and intimidating individual figures, communities, and organizations representing the Belarusian democratic movement.
2. Aggression against neighboring countries (especially Lithuania and Poland), including provocations intended to create tension between the Belarusian diaspora and host countries, attempts to discredit political elites, and the instrumentalization of history.
3. At the international level, sowing discord among EU and NATO allies, undermining coordinated Western policy toward the regime, and exploiting migration as a political tool.

Key narratives of the Belarus regime's propaganda include:

- ***Belarus as a besieged fortress:*** Framing the West and NATO as aggressive forces plotting the destruction or division of Belarus.
- ***NATO, the EU, Poland, and the Baltic States as threats:*** Emphasizing perceived threats from neighboring Western countries, especially Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia.
- ***NATO is weak, Poland and the Baltics are irrelevant:*** Despite contradicting the previous narrative, propaganda regularly stresses NATO's weakness as an alliance and its inability to fulfill its obligations.
- ***The opposition as an existential enemy:*** Labeling the democratic forces and proponents of change as "extremists," "puppets of the West," or "terrorist organizers."
- ***The collective West is Rewriting World War II history:*** Accusing the West and neighboring countries of rehabilitating Nazism and fascism.

- ***The West as morally and politically degenerate:*** Discrediting Western values and institutions—democracy, human rights, and freedom of expression—by accusing them of hypocrisy and double standards.
- ***Russia as the guarantor of sovereignty:*** Aligning with Russian ideological lines in the context of the war against Ukraine and justifying Russian aggression.

These narratives are disseminated through state media, Telegram channels, TikTok, bloggers, bots, and the regime's external proxy structures.

At the same time, the free dissemination of social and political information inside the country, which could serve as a buffer against disinformation, has been effectively criminalized and targeted by repression. Common tactics include:

- Labeling content as "extremist";
- Criminalizing the consumption of independent media;
- Mass shutdowns of independent outlets and persecution of journalists;
- Using "information security" as a legal basis for repression.

As a result, state and Russian narratives enjoy unrestricted circulation within Belarusian society, while accessing independent information requires additional effort and comes with serious risks.

In addition to partial geopolitical isolation, this informational isolation greatly increases the risk that the public will adopt a distorted worldview shaped by the regime's narratives. A worrying indicator of this trend is the shift in Belarusian youth (ages 18–24) attitudes over the past year and a half. Trust in state institutions and Lukashenka increased by 16% (from 60% to 76%); orientation toward Russia grew by 13% (from 22% to 35%); and positive assessments of the economic situation rose by 31% (from 21% to 52%⁵²).

Significance for the European Union

The legal acts and governance practices adopted by the Lukashenka regime are fundamentally incompatible and hostile to the legal, value-based, and institutional

⁵² iSANS public opinion monitoring. N=1290. March 2025.

framework of the European Union. This is not a matter of political disagreement but a conflict of worldviews: while the European model is built on individual rights, transparency, and freedom of expression, the model in Belarus prioritizes the regime's interests and control over society (see Table 4).

Against this backdrop, the regime not only builds a closed, repressive information system domestically, but also projects hybrid threats externally:

- **EU neighboring countries** (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia) are targeted with propaganda and cyber-information

Table 4. Comparison of the EU and the Belarus Regime Approaches to Information Policy

Principle	European Union	A. Lukashenka regime
Freedom of expression	Presumption of freedom, limited only in exceptional cases (DSA, Art. 11 of the EU Charter).	Presumption of threat: uncontrolled information is seen as inherently destructive (Information Security Concept [Doctrine], Directive No. 12).
Human rights	Individual rights take precedence over state interests (Arts. 1, 6 of the EU Charter).	State primacy: "national interests" override personal rights (National Security Concept).
Data governance	State transparency; citizens control their data (GDPR).	Centralized control by security services (OAC, KGB); surveillance and blocking without court rulings (Decree No. 60, OAC practices).
Media and pluralism	Pluralism, editorial independence, journalist protection (EDMO, Media Freedom Act).	Unified ideology, media supervision, censorship, criminal liability for "extremism" and "terrorism" (Directive No. 12, Belarusian Criminal Code).
Ideology	Institutional neutrality and value placed on the competition of ideas.	State ideology is mandatory; system of vertical "loyalty" (Directive No. 12, Ideological Foundations).

campaigns.

- **The Belarusian diaspora** – including EU citizens and residents—is subjected to transnational repression and manipulation.
- **Belarusian youth** face systemic ideological indoctrination aimed at erasing European identity.
- **Trust in the EU** is undermined via disinformation about "European decline," "migration chaos," and "anti-Western conspiracies."

This is accompanied by other hybrid actions, from migration pressure to military rhetoric and cyberattacks. Meanwhile, the EU's response remains fragmented.

The Digital Services Act (DSA) provides a framework for regulating online platforms but lacks mechanisms focused on external hybrid threats, especially from secondary actors like Belarus. Article 34 requires assessment of systemic risks, including disinformation and electoral interference, yet it does not mandate source-specific risk assessment for actors like the Lukashenka regime⁵³. As a result, regime-led information attacks may go unnoticed, especially if they do not follow the "pro-Russian" pattern. For example, campaigns against the Belarusian diaspora, EU disinformation on TikTok and Telegram, anti-Polish narratives, or interference in Latvian or Polish politics often receive insufficient attention.

⁵³ Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act) (Text with EEA relevance) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2065/oj/eng>

EDMO and East StratCom only partially address the Belarusian context. EDMO is primarily focused on EU member states, while regime propaganda remains in a grey zone. EUvsDisinfo regularly publishes reports and debunks narratives, but its monitoring misses many localized stories targeting the diaspora in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and especially Belarus's internal audience⁵⁴. Structures like the Hybrid CoE do not single out Belarus as a distinct subject of analysis⁵⁵. Within the EEAS-FIMI system itself, there is still no focus on Belarus-related cases⁵⁶. The lack of an information and analytical track leads to the underrepresentation of narratives specific to Minsk and weakens the EU's capacity for early response.

Despite the interconnectedness of the Eastern European region, *the EU has not developed scenario-based or analytical strategies for Belarus-related crises*, remaining overly focused on Russia's war against Ukraine. The 2019–2020 tensions between Minsk and Moscow, the 2020 anti-regime protests, the 2021 migration crisis, and the Lukashenko regime's role in Russia's aggression against Ukraine caught the EU off guard, leading to delayed, reactive policies and emergency legal measures. There is no "day after" strategy—i.e., no plan in the event of regime collapse, succession crisis, or sudden transformation.

Conclusion

In summary, the Lukashenko regime has established a sophisticated and centralized system of information control that serves both as a tool of domestic repression and as a mechanism for projecting hybrid threats beyond its borders. While closely aligned with Russia, this system is increasingly autonomous, with its own strategic logic, institutional structure, and operational capacity. It targets the European Union through cyber interference, disinformation campaigns, manipulation of migration, and transnational pressure on the Belarusian diaspora.

The European Union's current response remains limited and imprecise. It underestimates the risks posed directly by the Lukashenko regime, including its capacity to influence Moscow's strategy. Belarus is primarily viewed

through the lens of Russian policy, reducing institutional focus. Although the EU has formally acknowledged the regime's agency (e.g., statements by Josep Borrell, the EU Council⁵⁷), in practice, most tools are tailored to counter Russia, leaving Belarus "bundled" into the Russian problem set.



⁵⁴ EU vs Disinfo, [https://euvsdisinfo.eu/?s=%&disinfo_countries\[\]=country_77552](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/?s=%&disinfo_countries[]=country_77552)

⁵⁵ Hybrid CoE, https://www.hybridcoe.fi/all-content/?_keywords=Belarus

⁵⁶ How to detect and analyse identity based disinformation/FIMI, EEAS, 2024. <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/EEAS-DataTeam-OsintGuidelines-04-Digital.pdf>

⁵⁷ Belarus: EU broadens scope for sanctions to tackle hybrid attacks and instrumentalisation of migrants, Council of the EU, 2021. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/11/15/belarus-eu-broadens-scope-for-sanctions-to-tackle-hybrid-attacks-and-instrumentalisation-of-migrants/>

Recommendations

Strategic goal: to strengthen the European Union's response to hybrid threats originating from the Lukashenka regime by institutionalising Belarus as a distinct factor within EU information security policy, while fostering strategic engagement with Belarusian democratic forces, civil society, and the diaspora as partners in building regional digital resilience and safeguarding democratic values.

To: European External Action Service (EEAS), Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CONNECT), European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)

01.

Recognize Belarus as a distinct actor in the EU's Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) monitoring system.

This entails:

- Creating a Belarus-specific focus within the activities of EEAS StratCom, EDMO, and the Digital Services Act (DSA) implementing process.
- Requiring major online platforms, under Article 34 of the DSA, to include a dedicated analysis of regime-linked content and hybrid activity originating from Belarus in their annual risk assessments.
- Preventing Belarusian operations from being misattributed to Russia or overlooked in broader narratives, thereby improving the precision of EU countermeasures.

To: The Council of the EU, European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Commission

02.

Establish an EU-Belarus Hybrid threat coordination platform. The EU should initiate an interagency coordination platform, in partnership with Belarusian democratic forces, to anticipate, monitor, and respond to hybrid threats originating from the Lukashenka regime.

This platform should:

- Facilitate regular information exchange and joint scenario planning;
- Address key threat vectors such as migration manipulation, cyberattacks, transnational repression, and disinformation targeting the diaspora;
- Operate in coordination with DG HOME, ENISA, Frontex, Hybrid CoE, and relevant Member States.

To: European Commission, Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CONNECT)

03.

Enhance platform accountability under the Digital Services Act by requiring major platforms to report on Belarusian regime-linked disinformation and content manipulation. This will improve transparency and support civil society and researchers in tracking and responding to emerging hybrid threats.

To address the regime's use of major platforms for disinformation, militarization narratives, and anti-opposition propaganda:

- The European Commission should require Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) — including TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and Telegram — to report publicly on Belarusian regime-linked operations, including content distribution patterns, recommendation algorithms, and monetisation pathways.
- DG CONNECT should issue specific guidelines on how platforms can identify and mitigate activities connected to the Lukashenka regime.

To: EU

04.

Integrate Belarusian democratic actors and experts into EU Monitoring and Research Systems in order to strengthen early detection and ensure context-specific insight in threat analysis.

The EU should:

- Grant observer status to Belarusian NGOs and think tanks in regional EDMO hubs;
- Designate credible Belarusian actors as “vetted researchers” to enable access to platform data

relevant to disinformation and algorithmic manipulation;

- Support their inclusion in early-warning systems and narrative analysis networks under the DSA.

To: EU, European Endowment for Democracy (EED), Internews, Free Press Unlimited, MDIF.

05.

Expand support for independent Belarusian media and civil society initiatives. The EU should move beyond ad hoc assistance to establish a dedicated support mechanism for Belarusian independent media and analytical institutions by:

- Launching a targeted EU grant programme or establishing a Belarus-focused trust fund for hybrid threat response, digital rights advocacy, and strategic communications.
- Providing operational funding and flexible fast-track grants to allow for timely responses to emerging threats.
- Recognising Belarusian actors not only as aid recipients but as co-authors of EU resilience strategies.

To: EU

06.

Engage youth and digitally native audiences to build “digital immunity” and ensure that pro-European voices remain visible despite the regime’s information control.

The EU should expand its digital and cultural presence among Belarusian audiences (especially young people) via:

- Developing visual communication campaigns on platforms such as TikTok, Telegram, and YouTube;
- Supporting interactive formats including games, animation, and digital storytelling to convey European values, digital rights, and democratic narratives;
- Funding training initiatives on the DSA, privacy tools, and secure communication for journalists and activists.

07.

Institutionalize trust in independent Belarusian media and digital initiatives by formally recognising them as partners within the EU’s multi-level, decentralised digital governance framework.

The EU should formally recognise verified Belarusian media and digital initiatives as trusted flaggers under Article 22 of the DSA. This would empower them to report harmful content and participate in the design of systemic risk mitigation strategies; enable access to transparency tools, risk reports, and EU platform oversight mechanisms; lay the groundwork for a new category of “trusted conduits”—non-EU partners with proven expertise and audience access outside EU territory.

To: EU, Hybrid CoE, an Eastern European EDMO hub

08.

Strengthen regional resilience through a new Eastern Partnership Platform

The EU should create a regional platform under the Eastern Partnership specifically focused on countering Belarus-origin hybrid threats. This platform should:

- Provide training and tools for media literacy, disinformation detection, VPN use, and secure communication;
- Involve both EU actors and Belarusian experts in exile;
- Target both Belarus and neighbouring countries with large Belarusian diaspora communities (e.g., Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia).

Economic Security

Introduction

Belarus's economic security is a matter of strategic importance for the European Union. A stable, sovereign, and economically resilient Belarus would contribute to regional security, reduce the EU's eastern vulnerabilities, and offer new opportunities for trade, investment, and energy cooperation.

Conversely, Belarus's growing dependence on Russia, deteriorating institutions, and exposure to external shocks create risks that can spill over into the EU – through migration, sanctions circumvention, regional destabilization, or economic volatility in neighboring member states. For the EU, strengthening Belarus's economic security is a long-term investment in a more secure and integrated Eastern Europe. This means supporting a future-oriented vision rooted in diversification, market reform, institutional integrity, and global connectivity.

While today's political reality limits engagement, the EU has a vested interest in shaping the economic foundations of a democratic Belarus – one that can withstand external coercion, rejoin global markets, and become a constructive economic partner aligned with European values and standards.

To assess Belarus's economic security, this chapter uses a six-pillar framework that captures the country's ability to withstand shocks, avoid coercive dependencies, and sustain essential economic functions. These pillars – macroeconomic performance, financial stability, production capacity, external resilience, social inclusion, and institutional integrity – reflect the core vulnerabilities of a politically isolated and economically dependent state.

Macroeconomic Performance

Macroeconomic performance constitutes the most integral indicator of Belarus's economic security – and also its most fragile pillar. The country's average real GDP growth over the past decade has hovered around 0.6%, placing it among the lowest in the post-Soviet space. Even before the political crisis and the imposition of international sanctions in 2020–2022, Belarus had already exhausted the growth model based on state-controlled expansion, preferential energy prices from Russia, and administrative redistribution.

Analytical assessments indicate that the underlying potential growth rate of Belarus was no more than 1.5–2% even under pre-crisis conditions. Since 2022, this potential has further deteriorated due to:

- Severed access to Western markets and technologies;
- A pivot toward lower-productivity integration with the Russian economy;
- Supply chain disruptions;
- Shrinking FDI inflows and foreign credit;
- Worsening demographic trends, including a large-scale emigration wave since 2022 – estimated at over 300,000 people – exacerbating labor shortages and weakening the country's human capital base.

Belarus's macroeconomic institutions remain weak and reactive, with fiscal and monetary policies shaped by political imperatives rather than stability or counter-cyclicality. Although core inflation has been partially

restrained by administrative controls, price growth remains structurally higher than in neighboring CEE countries due to fragile monetary credibility, and limited independence of the National Bank of Belarus.

Furthermore, Belarus's exposure to energy and raw material price fluctuations – amplified by the dominance of Russian supply – adds another layer of macroeconomic vulnerability. Energy subsidies from Russia, while temporarily beneficial, embed asymmetric dependencies and discourage structural reforms aimed at energy diversification and efficiency.

The fiscal position is obscured by quasi-fiscal operations: directed lending to state enterprises, implicit subsidies, and hidden liabilities. While reported public debt levels remain below 40% of GDP, the country is in technical default on its Eurobond obligations and has unilaterally suspended debt service to most Western creditors. Debt statistics do not reflect Russia's extensive de facto financing, including energy subsidies, reverse excise flows, and bilateral loans.

Indicators of investment activity and reserves reinforce the picture of weakness. Gross fixed capital formation has been chronically low (during the last decade) and inefficiently allocated, while international reserves cover only around two months of imports and are increasingly tied up in illiquid or politically conditioned assets.

Belarus's macroeconomic outlook is extremely weak. Its growth potential is structurally constrained and insufficient to support convergence with neighboring EU economies. The country faces a high risk of macroeconomic instability, including recessions, inflation surges, and financial turbulence.



Financial Stability

Belarus's financial system is characterized by low depth and limited capacity to transform savings into productive investment. Key features include:

- A high degree of state ownership in the banking sector;
- The overall depth of the financial system is significantly lower than in neighboring EU countries and regional peers. For example, domestic credit to the private sector remains below 30% of GDP (compared to 50–60% in neighboring EU countries), while market capitalization and non-bank financial instruments are virtually negligible, whereas in regional peers these segments contribute significantly to financial intermediation;
- A marginal role for capital markets and non-bank financial institutions;
- Persistently high dollarization of household deposits (though recently declining due to administrative currency restrictions and shifts to cash holdings outside the banking system);
- Fragile liquidity conditions and severely limited access to international capital markets.

Sanctions have also triggered a new array of challenges for the financial system, ranging from reputational risk to blocked transactions and reduced correspondent networks. Some systemic banks have been disconnected from SWIFT. The sector has increasingly relied on Russia's financial infrastructure, notably the SPFS (System for Transfer of Financial Messages), which reduces flexibility and increases exposure to a single external actor. Belarus has also defaulted on its sovereign Eurobonds, having unilaterally halted payments to Western creditors in response to sanctions and legal constraints. This move has significantly damaged the country's financial reputation, cut off external borrowing options, and further constrained its access to international capital markets.

Belarus's financial security is undermined by shallow financial intermediation, weak institutional foundations, limited access to capital, and growing reliance on Russia. The system lacks the resilience to absorb shocks or support long-term transformation.

Production Security

The country's industrial base remains vulnerable to structural shocks. Under the pressure of sanctions and reduced access to Western technology and markets, Belarus's production chains have undergone forced reorientation. Key trends include:

- Concentration of production and exports in low-complexity sectors with limited value-added;
- Decline in the share of complex goods from 12.2% to 6.4% between 2000 and 2021;
- Reduction in the connectivity of revealed comparative advantage (RCA) goods, constraining potential for technological upgrading;
- Deterioration in Belarus's economic complexity: it ranks 33rd in CEE on trade-based Economic Complexity Index (ECI), and much lower on technological and research ECI (65th and 119th, respectively);
- High geographic and industrial concentration of production in a limited number of clusters, which increases vulnerability to localized disruptions and limits spatial economic diversification.

The dominant industrial sectors – machinery, chemicals, petrochemicals, and food processing – survive primarily through state support and exports to a shrinking pool of partners, mostly Russia. The contraction of external markets and lack of access to advanced technologies make these sectors increasingly uncompetitive.

Moreover, Belarus's production system has become heavily dependent on Russia for critical inputs, spare parts, and technology. The share of imported intermediate goods originating from Russia has grown substantially in recent years, deepening technological path dependence and reducing the potential for strategic diversification. This reliance poses structural risks, particularly in the context of Russia's own economic constraints and geopolitical volatility.

Thus, Belarus's production security is at risk. The country is stuck in a trap of low complexity, narrow export niches, and dependence on a single market. Its industrial structure lacks adaptability and resilience in the face of global transformation.

External Economic Resilience

Belarus's external economic resilience is severely compromised by its overwhelming dependence on Russia and poor diversification of trade and financial flows. This vulnerability is rooted not only in current geopolitical alignments but in longstanding structural weaknesses that limit the country's ability to absorb external shocks.

In particular, the limited geographical and product diversification of Belarus's external trade magnifies its exposure to external turbulence. Belarus's external economic position is heavily imbalanced and marked by extreme geographic concentration. More than 60% of Belarusian exports are directed to Russia, with imports similarly dominated by Russian energy, raw materials, and intermediate goods. The country has lost a sensitive part of its access to Western markets due to sanctions, eroding trade diversification.

The concentration of exports in a narrow range of low-value-added goods, often reliant on Russian demand or logistics, means that any disruption in Russian economic activity or policy shifts immediately reverberates throughout Belarus's economy. Similarly, the structure of import flows – with overdependence on Russian energy and intermediate goods – constrains the country's ability to pivot or substitute quickly in response to external shocks. These patterns have deepened in recent years. Russia's share in Belarusian exports and imports has reached unprecedented levels, driven both by political alignment and by forced reorientation due to Western sanctions. Alternative markets have not provided sufficient compensation, as logistical, institutional, and regulatory barriers remain unresolved.

This dependency is further intensified by Belarus's growing logistical reliance on Russia. The export of key strategic goods – such as potash fertilizers and petroleum products – now depends heavily on Russian port infrastructure and rail systems. Following the closure of access to Baltic and European logistics routes, Belarus has rerouted its exports through Russia, making it increasingly vulnerable to Russian pricing, capacity constraints, and political leverage.

From a systemic standpoint, this extreme dependency diminishes Belarus's external shock resilience – a core component of macroeconomic stability. The lack of diversified trade links, limited use of alternative financial instruments and currencies, and reliance on Russian infrastructure (e.g., banking, customs, transport) all compound the risk of external transmission of volatility. This dependency undermines the country's economic sovereignty. The trade structure has regressed toward

simple, low-margin products. Transit routes have been disrupted, with critical losses in port access and logistical corridors.

Alternative trade partnerships – such as with China, Turkey, or other non-Western economies – remain weak and opportunistic. Moreover, settlement mechanisms for foreign trade are constrained by financial sanctions and the necessity of using non-convertible currencies in bilateral arrangements with Russia.

Belarus lacks independent platforms for export credit insurance, trade finance, and transport coordination. In short, it operates as an economic satellite, with minimal strategic flexibility.

Technological and Resource Sustainability

Technological development in Belarus is stagnating. R&D spending as a share of GDP has been declining steadily, and the innovation system is bureaucratized and underfunded. Collaboration with global research centers has largely ceased.

Import substitution efforts have had limited success, often relying on outdated technologies or redirection to Russian suppliers. The digital economy remains underdeveloped outside the IT enclave, which itself has seen outmigration of talent and capital.

The energy sector is vulnerable due to its dependence on Russian hydrocarbons. Despite the completion of the Astravets nuclear power plant, diversification of energy sources remains minimal. Energy intensity of GDP is high compared to peers, reflecting inefficiencies in industrial and residential consumption.

Natural resource governance is opaque, and environmental sustainability is a marginal concern in policy planning. Belarus lacks robust institutions for managing climate risks, green transition, or sustainable agriculture.



Institutional Integrity

The institutional environment in Belarus is characterized by authoritarian control, deep politicization, and systemic erosion of governance quality. The regime exercises central control over all key branches of government, eliminating meaningful separation of powers and weakening all mechanisms of accountability.

Macroeconomic governance institutions operate without functional autonomy. The Ministry of Finance, the National Bank, and other regulatory bodies follow political instructions that often contradict economic logic. Budget planning, monetary policy, and public investment decisions are subordinated to short-term regime priorities, undermining their effectiveness and credibility. Legal and regulatory frameworks are unstable and subject to arbitrary reinterpretation. Rule of law is subordinated to executive discretion, with court decisions frequently reflecting political considerations rather than legal merit. This undermines both investor protection and the predictability of the business environment.

Corruption and informal networks have substituted formal procedures, especially in areas involving public procurement, large infrastructure projects, and state-owned enterprise management. Decision-making is increasingly opaque and concentrated in the presidential administration, circumventing institutional checks.

Institutional degradation has become self-reinforcing:

weak performance justifies further administrative centralization, which in turn reduces competence and increases volatility. The erosion of public administration quality manifests in erratic enforcement, limited responsiveness, and growing bureaucratic inertia. The absence of participatory governance and checks and balances erodes both trust and adaptive capacity. The regime's priorities override economic rationality, limiting the ability of the institutional system to respond to shocks or support long-term development.

Together, these factors make institutional integrity one of the most deeply eroded dimensions of economic security in Belarus.

Threats to Belarus's Economic Security

Belarus's economic security is currently exposed to a range of acute and systemic threats that stem from both internal fragilities and external geopolitical dynamics. These threats are multidimensional – strategic, institutional, and structural – and together form a self-reinforcing cycle of economic stagnation and vulnerability.

Strategic Overdependence on Russia

Russia has also intensified efforts to formalize this dependency through the framework of the so-called Union State. Ostensibly presented as a bilateral integration process, the Union State arrangement

serves as a tool for Moscow to promote its strategic agenda. Mechanisms within this framework – such as tax harmonization, customs alignment, and energy pricing coordination – are increasingly shaped by Russian priorities and used to limit Belarus's economic policy autonomy and sovereignty.

The Belarus regime, in turn, has aligned itself more closely with Russia out of political necessity. Following the 2020 political crisis and international isolation, survival – not economic modernization – became the regime's primary concern. Initially, greater dependence on Russia was viewed as the lesser evil; however, in recent years, the regime has increasingly sought this alignment as a perceived source of growth stimulus. It now anticipates economic benefits from integration and participation in the creation of products for the Russian military-industrial complex, despite growing evidence of strategic vulnerability.

Disconnection from the Global Economy

This detachment has also led to a collapse of modernization incentives. With the economy shielded from external competition and deprived of exposure to global best practices, the pressure to reform, innovate, and upgrade has diminished significantly. Administrative control and survival logic have replaced market-based modernization, further entrenching outdated production models.

As sanctions become prolonged, a sanctions lock-in effect emerges. Belarus risks adapting structurally to isolation – diverting trade, finance, and technological flows toward less advanced partners and creating new economic routines that normalize autarky and institutional stagnation. This path dependency reduces the likelihood of re-engagement and reforms even under changed political conditions.

In parallel, technological and regulatory backwardness has deepened. Belarus is increasingly aligned with standards and systems prevalent in Russia and other low-innovation environments, undermining interoperability, product competitiveness, and digital integration with global ecosystems.

Thus, isolation constrains the economy's growth ceiling and increases its exposure to negative selection in standards, partners, and investments. The long-term costs include technology degradation, brain drain, and chronic productivity stagnation.

External Shocks

Belarus's economic system is acutely vulnerable to a wide range of external shocks due to its structural fragility and internal instability. The country lacks sufficient buffers – fiscal, monetary, or institutional – to mitigate the impact

of disruptions originating abroad.

This internal fragility means that virtually any external shock – whether economic or political – can have disproportionately damaging effects. Economic shocks such as fluctuations in energy prices, global inflationary surges, trade interruptions, or a slowdown in global growth (particularly in Russia) quickly translate into fiscal stress, inflation, or output contraction. The absence of diversified trade and financial channels, coupled with weak domestic demand, exacerbates the effect of such shocks.

Political shocks are equally significant. The eventual outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian war, regardless of direction, is likely to trigger a reevaluation of Belarus's strategic position and could upend the current economic equilibrium. Sanctions, changing regional security alignments, or shifts in Russian policy may all create new pressures that Belarus is ill-prepared to absorb.

External volatility – particularly linked to the Russian-Ukrainian war and broader East-West tensions – has significantly increased the country's exposure and reduced its capacity for autonomous policy responses.

Human Capital Erosion and Institutional Decline

Belarus's economic security is increasingly undermined by the dual erosion of human capital and institutional capacity. The country has experienced a significant outflow of talent due to political repression, deteriorating economic prospects, and limited career development opportunities. This brain drain has weakened the innovation ecosystem, reduced labor productivity, and eroded the quality of human capital across sectors.

At the same time, there has been a collapse of institutional memory and technical expertise within state institutions. The purging or departure of experienced professionals from the public sector, academia, banking, and policy-making bodies has led to a governance void. In many cases, critical decision-making functions are now handled by inexperienced or politically loyal individuals with limited technical competence.

This dual erosion – of talent and institutional depth – reduces the system's adaptive capacity, heightens risks of crisis mismanagement, and discourages investment. It also exacerbates the risk of falling into a low-growth equilibrium sustained by administrative coercion rather than economic logic.

Structural Legacy and Internal Constraints

Before the post-2020 realignment with Russia, Belarus's growth potential was already constrained by the regime's desire to preserve the existing economic structure. The state-dominated model was maintained not for reasons

of efficiency or modernization, but because it enabled political and administrative control over the economy. This “control logic” shaped labor market rigidity, SOE dominance, credit allocation patterns, and barriers to private sector development.

The result has been persistent underperformance: low productivity, constrained innovation, and systemic inefficiencies. Even in periods of macroeconomic stability, the economy failed to transition to higher-value-added activities or modernize its institutional framework.

Conclusion

The objective constraints on Belarus’s economic security are largely rooted in the political preferences of both the Belarusian and Russian regimes. The authoritarian nature of governance in both countries privileges short-term stability and regime preservation over reform, competition, or institutional modernization.

In recent years, Belarus’s international isolation has further cemented this logic. The economic fallout from this isolation – including loss of access to Western finance, markets, and institutions – has pushed Belarus into deeper reliance on Russian subsidies and coordination mechanisms. This creates a vicious cycle: the more Belarus depends on Russia to sustain its economy, the less room it has to pursue diversification or institutional improvements.

The actors creating these threats—primarily the Russia and Belarus regimes – do not pursue economic harm as a goal in itself. However, their geopolitical strategies and authoritarian incentives produce outcomes that undermine economic security:

- **Russia:** Seeks geopolitical control and loyalty from Belarus; offers short-term economic support in exchange for strategic alignment; disincentivizes diversification.
- **The Belarusian regime:** Prioritizes regime survival and administrative control over modernization; views economic integration with Russia as a necessary and potentially beneficial compromise.
- **External actors:** Western sanctions aim to pressure political change but also unintentionally deepen Belarus’s dependence on Russia.

Several objective factors reinforce the persistence of these threats:

- Lack of institutional autonomy and rule of law;

- Absence of policy continuity or credible reform commitments;
- External sanctions and exclusion from Western institutions;
- Asymmetric economic size and structure in relation to Russia;
- Brain drain, emigration, and demographic decline;
- Weak private sector and limited access to global capital and technology.

Without a fundamental political and institutional shift – including democratization and diversification of foreign policy – these factors will continue to limit Belarus’s ability to restore economic sovereignty and resilience.

Overcoming Belarus’s entrenched economic vulnerabilities and restoring the foundations of economic security will require long-term structural and institutional transformation. Given the current political realities, such change is not immediately feasible. However, a strategic agenda can be formulated now – both to mitigate risks under current conditions and to prepare for a future transition to a more open and resilient economic model.

Recommendations

Strategic goal: to reduce Belarus's structural economic vulnerabilities and prepare for a future democratic transition by supporting resilience, institutional development, and reintegration into the European and global economy.

European Union: Calibrated Support for Long-Term Stability

The European Union has a pivotal role in mitigating Belarus's current economic vulnerabilities and enabling its future recovery. EU strategic engagement should proceed along two complementary tracks:

01.

Mitigation of Current Risks via:

- Countering the structural absorption of Belarus into Russia's geopolitical and economic space. This includes resisting deeper integration in infrastructure, legal systems, and strategic sectors. Unchallenged, this process will lock Belarus into Russia's orbit and deplete resources that could otherwise support a democratic transformation.
- Supporting the development of economic proto-institutions by investing in diaspora-led innovation hubs, independent business platforms, and sector-specific advisory bodies that can serve as incubators of economic policy expertise and operational capacity during the transition.
- Monitoring and documenting the ongoing erosion of governance and institutional integrity. European organizations, think tanks, and multilateral institutions can play a key role in tracking governance regression, human rights abuses, and systemic corruption.
- Maintaining societal connectivity and social capital. Educational, research, and professional exchange programmes should continue to foster links with Belarusian society, countering isolation and preserving long-term reintegration capacity.

02.

Preparation for Democratic Transition via:

- Providing a clear and credible vision for Belarus's future integration with the EU and international institutions. This should include developing scenarios for political association, economic cooperation, and institutional convergence, sending strong signals to Belarusian society that alternatives to the Russian model exist.
- Offering preferential market access and investment insurance to support rapid reintegration with the global economy under democratic governance.
- Preparing technical assistance packages for macroeconomic stabilization, fiscal reform, and institutional restructuring, to be activated as soon as a transition is underway.
- Coordinating a multilateral recovery framework, involving international financial institutions (IFIs), EU bodies, and partner governments, modeled after successful post-authoritarian transformations in Central and Eastern Europe.

Crucially, the EU must balance sustained pressure on the current regime with measures that prevent the entrenchment of Belarus's dependency on Russia. The deeper Belarus's institutional integration with Russia becomes today, the more difficult it will be to reverse in the future.

03.

To support the long-term economic recovery of Belarus, democratic forces should prioritize the development of proto-institutions capable of serving as foundational elements of a post-authoritarian economic system. These efforts should focus on:

- Supporting Belarusian human capital through educational, cultural, entrepreneurial platforms, emerging business communities and civil society coalitions;
- Establishing and developing professional associations, policy think tanks, diaspora cooperation platforms, and financial support mechanisms aimed at empowering reform-minded professionals and entrepreneurs.

04.

While democratic forces currently lack formal institutional authority, they can contribute significantly to strengthening Belarus's economic security through advocacy, agenda-setting, and strategic preparation for political transition. Priority actions include:

- Developing a credible vision for post-authoritarian economic recovery, including macroeconomic stabilization, reintegration into global markets, and governance reform;
- Building coalitions with experts, civil society, and the business diaspora by leveraging external knowledge networks and professional communities to preserve institutional memory and strengthen reform capacity;
- Promoting transparency, anti-corruption standards and good governance principles, even from exile, to influence public expectations and norms;
- Documenting economic damage and institutional losses, which will be crucial for future compensation mechanisms and transitional justice;
- Strengthening engagement with international financial institutions and donors to position democratic forces as legitimate and prepared interlocutors for post-transition economic assistance.

Above all, democratic actors should clearly communicate the interdependence between political transformation and sustainable economic recovery. Without regime change, no meaningful progress on economic security will be possible.

05.

Belarus's path to economic security ultimately depends on democratization and a fundamental shift in its political economy. While immediate structural transformation is constrained, preparatory steps can and must begin now. A coordinated agenda of the European Union and Belarusian democratic forces should include :

- Maintaining a future-oriented economic vision grounded in transparency, institutional resilience, and global integration;
- Preventing irreversible economic deterioration and growing strategic dependency on Russia;
- Preserving human capital and institutional memory, both within Belarus and across its global diaspora;
- Designing adaptable post-transition policy frameworks for economic governance to be implemented when political conditions permit.

This collaborative approach will not only help mitigate current risks but also accelerate the country's recovery once the window of opportunities opens . In this context, economic security should be treated not only as a long-term goal but also as a guiding principle for shaping the future of a sovereign, resilient, and European Belarus.

Migration Security

Introduction

Belarus occupies a strategically important position in the context of European migration security due to its location on the EU's eastern frontier and its close alliance with Russia. As a transit corridor between Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, Belarus has the potential to influence migratory flows into the European Union either as a partner in border management or, as seen in recent years, as a source of hybrid threats.

The Belarusian regime's instrumentalization of migration demonstrated how state actors can exploit migration routes for political leverage, testing the EU's ability to protect its borders while upholding humanitarian obligations. This makes Belarus not only a focal point of concern for regional stability but also a critical element in shaping the EU's broader strategy on migration, border resilience, and hybrid threat preparedness.



General Context

In 2021, the Lukashenka regime deliberately orchestrated a migration crisis by facilitating the arrival of migrants from the Middle East and Africa to the EU borders, most notably Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia⁵⁸. Unlike conventional migration flows driven by conflict or economic hardship, this wave was deliberately manipulated by the Belarusian government as a part of its broader hybrid warfare strategy against the West.

In retaliation for EU sanctions and criticism following the fraudulent 2020 presidential election and violent crackdown on protests, the Belarusian regime issued fast-track visas and lured migrants with false promises of easy entry into the EU, only to abandon them later in border zones under dire conditions. The EU termed such a strategy a “hybrid warfare” through the “instrumentalization of migrants for political purposes.”

⁵⁹This weaponization of migration, implicitly backed by Russia through political support and coordinated disinformation, represented more than a localized humanitarian crisis⁶⁰. It exposed the EU's vulnerability to hybrid threats from hostile authoritarian regimes.

Migration as a Hybrid Threat

Historically, Belarus has benefited from positioning itself between Russia and the European Union, striving to maintain this strategic balance by acting as a self-proclaimed “regional security donor.” Lukashenka frequently emphasized his role in bolstering border infrastructure to enhance the security of both Belarus and the EU. However, this engagement was short-lived, and after 2020, the Lukashenka regime changed its rhetoric, threatening to flood Europe with drugs and migrants.

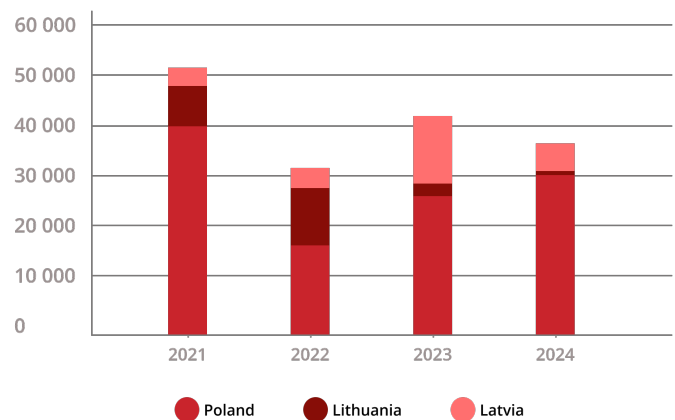
Instrumentalized migration as a pressure tool against

the EU's sanctions has been an attractive strategy for the Belarus regime for several reasons⁶¹.

First, compared to military escalation or economic retaliation, it is a relatively low-cost method with a high political impact. Since the 2015 migration crisis, migration from the Middle East and Africa has become a deeply divisive issue in Europe, fueling the rise of populist parties in various EU member states. The resulting internal fragmentation makes instrumentalized migration a potent method for exploiting EU vulnerabilities. Public opinion in Europe is often split between calls for strict border control and demands to uphold asylum seekers' rights. Democratic governments risk backlash if they violate international humanitarian norms, making it difficult to respond forcefully to such tactics.

Second, the Lukashenka regime may have been motivated by financial considerations. The smuggling of migrants offered a potent revenue stream, with some individuals reportedly paying up to \$15,000 for the journey⁶². Moreover, many who arrived in 2021 had used Belavia airlines, the state-owned company that had lost substantial business following the EU's airspace ban on June 4, 2021⁶³, and providing the Belarus regime with another financial incentive to facilitate migration.

Illegal crossings of EU borders with Belarus



⁵⁸ Belarus border crisis: How are migrants getting there?; Poland-Belarus border crisis: what is going on and who is to blame, Politico, 2024. <https://www.politico.eu/article/alexander-lukashenko-belarus-secret-program-to-undermine-the-eu/>

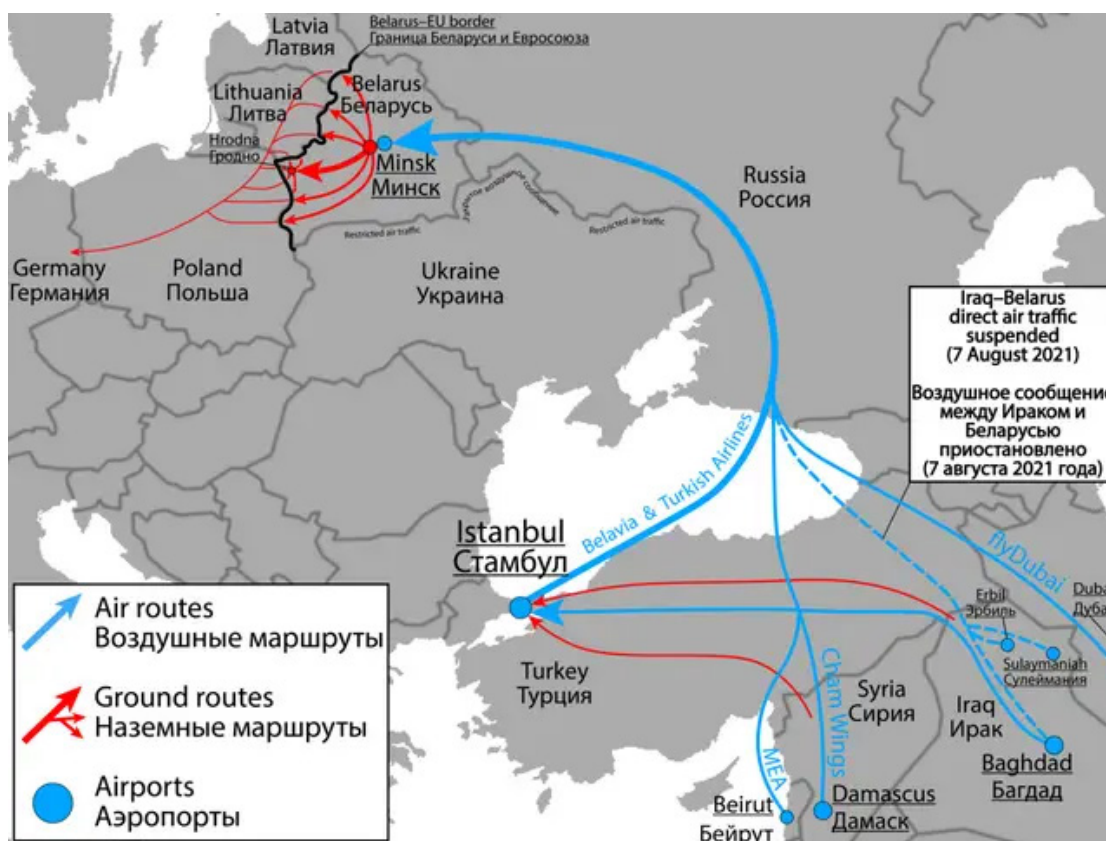
⁵⁹ Commission proposes measures to strengthen border security and counter hybrid threats, European Commission, 2024. https://commission.europa.eu/news/commission-proposes-measures-strengthen-border-security-and-counter-hybrid-threats-2024-12-11_en; <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/belarus/#borders>

⁶⁰ Belarus migrants: Poland PM blames Russia's Putin for migrant crisis, BBC, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59226226>

⁶¹ Between Security and Human Rights: Addressing State-Sponsored Instrumentalization of Migration by Belarus and Russia, Pulaski Policy Papers, 2024. https://pulaski.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Pulaski_Policy_Paper_No_13_2024_ENG-Malwina-Talik.pdf

⁶² Inside Belarus's secret program to undermine the EU, Politico, 2024. <https://www.politico.eu/article/alexander-lukashenko-belarus-secret-program-to-undermine-the-eu/>; <https://investigativejournalismforeu.net/projects/special-services-the-belarus-migration-business/>

⁶³ EU bans Belarusian carriers from its airspace and airports, Council of the EU, 2021. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/06/04/eu-bans-belarusian-carriers-from-its-airspace-and-airports/>



Russia's Involvement in the Instrumentalization of Migration

Belarus's actions in response to EU sanctions were likely not unplanned. The use of migration as a geopolitical tool requires detailed coordination and logistical support. It has been argued that as early as 2011–2012, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Belarusian KGB had conceptualized a strategy, allegedly referred to as “Operation Lock”, designed to manipulate migration flows for political and economic leverage over the EU⁶⁴. Thus, such operations can be framed as part of a broader hybrid warfare approach, wherein Russia and Belarus exploit existing EU vulnerabilities through calculated, non-military tactics that avoid triggering conventional conflict. The objective is to undermine border security and deepen internal political divisions within EU member states.

According to Frontex, the EU's border and coast guard agency, the Eastern border registered over 2,680 irregular border crossings in 2024⁶⁵. The primary migrants came from Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Syria — war-torn countries where deportations are extremely difficult, if not impossible⁶⁶. In 2024, irregular arrivals at the EU-Belarus border, especially the Polish-Belarusian border, increased significantly by 66% compared to 2023⁶⁷. According to the European Commission, over 90% of migrants crossing illegally from Belarus to Poland were in possession of Russian student or tourist visas⁶⁸.

For Russia, this dynamic offers clear strategic benefits. It helps preserve Belarus as a loyal and dependent ally while simultaneously destabilizing neighboring countries and prolonging regional tensions.

⁶⁴ Addressing State-Sponsored Instrumentalization of Migration by Belarus and Russia, Pulaski Policy Papers, 2024. https://pulaski.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Pulaski_Policy_Paper_No_13_2024_ENG-Malwina-Talik.pdf

⁶⁵ Ukrainians fleeing the war were the largest group, with 13,847 border crossings; they are provided immediate protection under a special EU law.

⁶⁶ <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/12/11/brussels-green-lights-polands-plan-to-temporarily-suspend-right-to-asylum>

⁶⁷ EU Commission, Commission steps up support for Member States to strengthen EU security and counter the weaponisation of migration, 2024. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_6251

⁶⁸ ETIAS, 2024. <https://etias.com/articles/eu-border-measures-target-migrant-weaponization-by-russia,-belarus>; <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/12/11/brussels-green-lights-polands-plan-to-temporarily-suspend-right-to-asylum>

Humanitarian Risks

The most immediate threat is the humanitarian emergency created at the EU's borders. Thousands of migrants have been stranded in forests and border zones, facing freezing temperatures during the winter months, a lack of medical assistance, and food shortages. The Belarusian authorities, in some cases, prevented migrants from returning to Minsk or retreating from the border, effectively using them as human shields⁶⁹. According to the civil society group We Are Monitoring, at least 87 people died near the border between September 2021 and October 2024, including 14 recorded deaths in 2024 alone.

Migration crisis placed the EU in a difficult position – having to balance the need for border security with its obligations under international refugee law, raising concerns about possible breaches of human rights and the EU's commitment to the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits sending individuals back to places where they may face persecution, torture, or inhuman or degrading treatment⁷⁰. International customary law forbids it even during national emergencies or war and formalizes its validity also in border regions⁷¹.

Political Destabilization and Polarization in the EU

The crisis fueled anti-immigration sentiment within the EU, empowering movements that pushed for stricter immigration policies and criticized the EU's management

of asylum procedures⁷². This dynamic has contributed to political fragmentation across Member States⁷³, exacerbating disagreements over the distribution of responsibility for border management and asylum seekers.

The Polish government has framed the instrumentalized migration on the border with Belarus as a national security issue. In line with that, both chambers of the Polish Parliament have passed a bill temporarily suspending the right to seek asylum in Poland, which was signed into law by the President Andrzej Duda in March 2025⁷⁴. In addition, the security dimensions of instrumentalized migration have strongly influenced the priorities of Poland's presidency of the Council of the EU. Poland presented a programme under the slogan "Security, Europe!" that broke down the concept of security into seven different dimensions, including migration security. Among its top objectives is the response to hybrid threats targeting both people and borders⁷⁵.

Similarly, on July 12, 2024, Finland enacted the Act on Temporary Measures to Combat Instrumentalized Migration, permitting border guards to push back individuals crossing from Russia without allowing them to apply for asylum. The law, passed by a wide parliamentary majority, can be activated when there is a "justified suspicion" of foreign interference threatening Finland's sovereignty and national security. Its scope and duration are strictly limited: the government must define the specific border area affected, and enforcement may last no longer than one month or until the threat subsides⁷⁶.

⁶⁹ Violence and Pushbacks at Poland-Belarus Border, Human Rights Watch, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/07/violence-and-pushbacks-poland-belarus-border>

⁷⁰ Legal considerations on asylum and non-refoulement in the context of 'instrumentalization', UNHCR, 2024. https://www.refworld.org/policy/legalguidance/unhcr/2024/en/148736?prevDestination=search&prevPath=/search?ss_document_type_name%5B%5D=Legal+Policy+and+Guidance&sort=score&order=desc&result=result-148736-en

⁷¹ Access to territory and non-refoulement, UNHCR, 2025. <https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection/legal-framework/access-territory-and-non-refoulement>

⁷² Far-right nationalists march in Poland amid border crisis with Belarus, The Times of Israel, 2021. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/far-right-nationalists-march-in-poland-amid-tense-border-crisis-with-belarus/>

⁷³ Poland-Belarus migrant crisis: Where does the EU stand?, Aljazeera, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/17/geopolitical-fears-dictate-the-eus-response-to-migration-crisis>

⁷⁴ Polish senate greenlights bill to curb asylum rights, Barrons, 2023. <https://www.barrons.com/news/polish-senate-greenlights-bill-to-curb-asylum-rights-5c3fffee>; Poland introduces law allowing suspension of asylum rights, Notes from Poland, 2025. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2025/03/26/poland-introduces-law-allowing-suspension-of-asylum-rights/>

⁷⁵ Priorities, Polish presidency Council of the European Union, 2025. <https://polish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme/priorities/>

⁷⁶ After Finland legalised migrant pushbacks, many fear a 'dangerous precedent', EuroNews, 2024. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/07/30/after-finland-legalised-migrant-pushbacks-many-fear-a-dangerous-precedent>

In its December 2024 Communication⁷⁷, the European Commission reaffirmed that Member States are responsible for safeguarding the EU's external borders while fully respecting fundamental rights, particularly the principle of non-refoulement. In light of the persistent and serious threats to the EU's security and the territorial integrity of its Member States, especially along the borders with Russia and Belarus, the Commission acknowledged that, under exceptional and narrowly defined circumstances, Member States may invoke Treaty provisions that permit them to adopt measures exceeding those outlined in EU secondary legislation. Such actions remain subject to judicial oversight by the Court of Justice of the European Union. While these measures may entail substantial limitations on fundamental rights, including the right to asylum and related protections, they must nonetheless adhere to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The Communication outlines the criteria for their application: they must be proportionate, strictly necessary, clearly limited in scope, and temporary in duration.



Testing Western Resilience

This migration crisis is not just a retaliation tactic of the Belarus regime against sanctions—it is also a broader test of Western resilience. Lukashenka's use of instrumentalized migration serves multiple strategic purposes. First, it seeks to weaken the unity of the EU by exacerbating internal divisions over border security, migration policy, and asylum management. This fragmentation hampers the EU's ability to present a coherent and unified response.

Second, the crisis acts as a distraction from the Belarusian regime's intensified domestic repression, diverting international attention away from human rights abuses within Belarus. By shifting the focus to external security threats, Lukashenka tries to consolidate his position internally and justify authoritarian measures.

Third, the migration crisis signals Belarus's firm alignment with Russia, showcasing their coordinated use of hybrid tactics, those that fall below the threshold of conventional warfare but aim to destabilize opponents through multifaceted pressure. This includes exploiting vulnerabilities in EU border management and social cohesion.

Finally, the tactic is designed to coerce the EU into negotiations, with Lukashenka leveraging the crisis as political capital. By creating a humanitarian and security emergency, he positions himself as a necessary interlocutor who can offer stability in exchange for sanctions relief or political recognition. This form of coercive diplomacy seeks to extract concessions while undermining EU policies aimed at promoting democracy and human rights in Belarus.

Opportunities

Despite the risks, this migration crisis revealed key opportunities for the EU and its partners to strengthen their resilience and cohesion.

A Catalyst for Policy Reform

The Belarus-orchestrated migration crisis has acted as a wake-up call for the EU, providing political momentum for long-delayed reforms in migration and asylum policy. In particular, it underscored the urgent need for a harmonized asylum system that enables a more coordinated and efficient response to sudden migratory pressures, especially when used as a tool of hybrid warfare.

⁷⁷ Commission steps up support for Member States to strengthen EU security and counter the weaponisation of migration, European Commission, 2024. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_6251



The crisis strengthened the case for the EU Operational Response to migration challenges. As a result of Belarus's manipulation of migration flows at the borders with Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland in 2021, and more recently by Russia at the Finnish border, the EU rapidly stepped up its financial, operational, and diplomatic support. These efforts were not limited to crisis management but also contributed to building longer-term resilience along the EU's eastern frontier.

In December 2024, the European Commission announced an additional €170 million in funding through the Border Management and Visa Instrument (BMVI), including €150 million in direct border support and €20 million from the BMVI Thematic Facility⁷⁸. This funding is being allocated to strengthen real-time surveillance, telecommunication systems, mobile detection, and counter-drone technologies in countries such as Poland (€52 million), Finland (€50 million), Estonia (€19.4 million), Latvia (€17 million), Lithuania (€15.4 million), and Norway (€16.4 million). These measures aim to enhance situational awareness, increase the mobility of border patrols, and fortify Europe's outer borders against further manipulation.

Such decisive financial mobilization also demonstrates the EU's capacity to quickly deploy resources when faced with non-traditional threats, strengthening its credibility in crisis response and bolstering public confidence in its institutions.

Strengthening EU-NATO Cooperation

The crisis has highlighted the blurred boundaries between civilian and military domains in modern hybrid conflicts. The instrumentalization of migration, used as a non-military tool to destabilize and provoke EU Member States, has brought renewed urgency to calls for closer

EU-NATO coordination.

This opens new avenues for strategic cooperation, particularly in the fields of border security, cyber resilience, joint intelligence sharing, counter-disinformation strategies, and rapid reaction capabilities. Integrating migration-related hybrid threats into joint EU-NATO threat assessments and exercises would help both organizations better prepare for similar scenarios in the future, particularly along the eastern flank.

Proactive Engagement with Countries of Origin

The crisis also highlighted the importance of sustained diplomatic engagement with countries of origin and transit, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa. Many migrants were deceived by Belarusian state propaganda and private intermediaries into believing that safe and legal entry into the EU was possible via Belarus. Countering such manipulation requires the EU to step up public information campaigns, expand legal migration pathways, and conclude readmission and mobility agreements with partner countries. For example, Poland has already initiated an international awareness campaign aimed at discouraging irregular migration from several African and Asian countries. The initiative targets potential migrants in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Pakistan, and Egypt, warning them of the risks and legal consequences of attempting to enter the EU through irregular routes⁷⁹.

Greater cooperation with origin and transit countries not only helps disrupt human smuggling networks and propaganda campaigns but also allows the EU to offer viable alternatives to irregular migration, thereby reducing the effectiveness of coercive strategies that exploit vulnerable populations for geopolitical gain.

⁷⁸ Commission steps up support for Member States to strengthen EU security and counter the weaponisation of migration, European Commission, 2024. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_6251

⁷⁹ Poland launches awareness campaign to deter Asian, African migrants, TVP World, 2025. <https://tvpworld.com/87018733/poland-launches-awareness-campaign-to-deter-asian-african-migrants>



Supporting the Belarusian Democratic Movement

The international attention drawn to the humanitarian crisis also reinvigorated the efforts of Belarusian democratic forces and civil society actors in exile. The mistreatment of migrants, many of whom were trapped by the actions of the Lukashenko regime, strengthened the case for increased EU support for independent Belarusian media, human rights organizations, and the democratic forces.

This crisis reaffirmed the importance of supporting Belarusian civil society as a vital actor not only in advocating for democracy and human rights but also in exposing the authoritarian regime's tactics of coercion and manipulation. Sustained EU investment in civil society infrastructure and independent media, especially in border regions, can help counter hybrid threats in the short term and foster long-term democratic transformation in the region.

Conclusion

The instrumentalisation of migration by the Belarusian regime since 2021 has evolved into a potent hybrid warfare tactic targeting the European Union's eastern borders. Unlike conventional migration flows driven by conflict or economic necessity, this state-orchestrated

crisis was deliberately engineered to retaliate against EU sanctions, exploit political divisions, and destabilise Member States. Backed by Russian political support and logistical assistance, the Lukashenko regime has weaponised migration as a tool of coercive diplomacy, one that simultaneously produces humanitarian, security, and geopolitical repercussions.

While the crisis inflicted serious humanitarian and political challenges, it also served as a catalyst for strengthening EU border management, accelerating overdue policy reforms, and deepening cooperation with NATO. It underscored the urgent need to address migration weaponisation as a core component of the hybrid threat landscape requiring coordinated, rights-based, and forward-looking responses. Such measures must not only enhance operational resilience but also foster political unity, counter disinformation, and sustain support for Belarus's democratic movement. By pursuing this dual approach and combining robust security preparedness with principled engagement, the EU can neutralise the impact of such tactics and safeguard both its borders and its values.

Recommendations

Strategic goal: to enhance the EU's resilience against the instrumentalization of migration by authoritarian regimes by strengthening hybrid threat detection, reinforcing border preparedness, promoting democratic resilience in Belarus, and integrating migration manipulation into the EU's comprehensive security and foreign policy frameworks.

To achieve this goal EU should:

01.

Recognize state-orchestrated migration crises as deliberate instruments of hybrid warfare.

Migration manipulation should be incorporated into the EU's and NATO's joint threat assessments, scenario planning, and crisis response mechanisms via:

- Treating migration security as an integral part of EU foreign and security policy;
- Including migration-linked hybrid threats in EU-NATO strategic exercises;
- Strengthening cooperation between DG HOME, Frontex, and EEAS.

02.

Finalize and implement a cohesive EU migration and asylum policy

Accelerate the adoption and operationalisation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) reform to ensure effective, coordinated responses to politically motivated migration pressure. Key priorities include:

- Creating flexible coordination mechanisms and responsibility-sharing tools during crises;
- Strengthening humanitarian response capabilities at external borders;
- Ensuring full compliance with international refugee law.

03.

Deter state-sponsored smuggling through targeted sanctions

Expand the scope of EU restrictive measures to include individuals, airlines, and state-linked entities in Belarus and Russia that facilitate or profit from the trafficking and instrumentalization of migrants. This should include:

- Sanctioning those directly involved in operations;
- Enhancing EU capabilities to track and disrupt financial flows and supply chains behind these hybrid operations.

04.

Reinforce frontline defences and hybrid threat preparedness

Provide continued and expanded support to Member States on the EU's eastern frontier through the Border Management and Visa Instrument (BMVI) and other EU security mechanisms. Priority actions include:

- Scaling up real-time surveillance systems, counter-drone infrastructure, and mobile patrol technology;
- Enhancing early warning systems and data-sharing protocols across borders;
- Expanding joint EU-NATO training to include scenarios involving migration as a hybrid tactic.

05.

Support democratic resilience in Belarus

Increase long-term EU investment in independent Belarusian media, human rights organisations, and democratic forces in exile that expose the regime's coercive practices and inform international responses. This includes:

- Treating these actors as strategic partners in early warning and disinformation monitoring;
- Supporting their capacity to provide timely intelligence, narrative analysis, and humanitarian advocacy;
- Ensuring their inclusion in EU-supported civil society platforms focused on hybrid threat mitigation.

06.

Strengthen Strategic Communication and Public Awareness

Coordinate a unified EU narrative that presents state-driven migration manipulation as a deliberate security threat, not just a border control issue. Recommended actions include:

- Developing fact-based communication campaigns countering Belarusian and Russian disinformation;
- Supporting public diplomacy initiatives in Member States that explain the EU's response and uphold its humanitarian values;
- Reinforcing public trust in the EU's ability to manage security crises while respecting fundamental rights.

07.

Deepen cooperation with countries of origin and transit

Expand EU engagement with key countries in the Middle East and Africa to disrupt trafficking routes and reduce vulnerability to Belarusian manipulation. Priority actions include:

- Launching information campaigns in countries of origin to counter misleading narratives about access to the EU via Belarus;
- Expanding legal migration pathways **and** mobility partnerships;
- Supporting efforts to break smuggling networks and prevent re-mobilization of irregular flows.



Youth Security

The regime represses youth strategically because it understands their role in shaping the country's future. For the EU, supporting Belarusian youth is a long-term investment in democratic transformation and regional security.



General Context

The resilience, values, and political orientation of youth directly influence the long-term stability of the European neighbourhood. In Belarus, young people – students, professionals, and activists – find themselves at a crossroads between authoritarian repression and democratic potential. Their political engagement, which intensified following the widely disputed 2020 election and resulting protests, made them prime targets of state violence, mass arrests, and enforced exile.

Belarusian youth had been active before 2020, but their role became central to mobilisation campaigns organised via digital tools, with significant participation from independent associations. Mass protests in August 2020 brought hundreds of thousands into the streets; youth leaders and networks led the coordination and were disproportionately punished.

This generation remains pivotal for democratic change. The *direction of their future*, guided either by state propaganda and isolation or by European values and opportunity, will shape whether Belarus evolves into a sovereign democracy or becomes increasingly integrated into Russia's geopolitical agenda.



Repression of Youth

The Lukashenka regime has systematically targeted young Belarusians. While youth under 35 make up only

about 21–22% of the general population, they account for approximately **45% of political prisoners**⁸⁰ – more than double their demographic share, indicating clear disproportionate targeting.

Repression has taken both direct and structural forms, aiming not only to punish but to destroy the infrastructure of youth civic life:

- **Mass expulsions:** Students were expelled from universities for participating in peaceful protests, signing petitions, or sharing critical posts. Under political pressure, Rectors implemented these purges to set examples and deter others. Academic institutions, once neutral, became extensions of the state's repressive apparatus.
- **Criminalisation of dissent:** Dozens of youth leaders were arrested under unreasonable charges, such as *“creating an extremist formation.”* Public trials, including mobile courts in universities, created an atmosphere of permanent surveillance and fear. Even attending an academic conference abroad or being part of a student group chat could lead to a prison sentence.
- **Destruction of civil society:** Youth civil society was dismantled as over 1,600 *organisations were liquidated, silencing independent platforms for youth participation*^{81 82}. Among them were nearly all youth-led or youth-serving organisations. These included the Belarusian Students' Association (BSA), RADA (the Belarusian National Youth Council), Youth Bloc, Studrada, local clubs and volunteer groups. Their liquidation removed the formal channels through which young people could participate, advocate, or find support.
- **Erasure of informal networks:** Telegram channels, youth study circles, and even solidarity initiatives like student legal aid groups have been infiltrated or declared extremist.

In parallel, the regime continues to build its own “safe” alternative—state-run loyalty structures such as the

⁸⁰ The protection of youth rights and support of young political prisoners of Belarus, Youth Forum, 2023. https://www.youthforum.org/files/231117_M-ProtectionYouthRights.pdf#:~:text=regime%20arrests%20citizens%20who%20believe,crisis%2C%20where%20their%20lives%20are

⁸¹ What is happening in Belarusian education and academia four years after the presidential elections of August 2020? , New Eastern Europe Magazine, 2024. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2024/11/14/what-is-happening-in-belarusian-education-and-academia-four-years-after-the-presidential-elections-of-august-2020/#:~:text=There%20are%20even%20more%20%E2%80%9Ccreative%E2%80%9D,There>

⁸² Continuing repression and deterioration of the human rights situation in Belarus, United Nations, 2023. <https://www.unognewsroom.org/story/en/1682/hrc-53-sr-anais-marin-on-belarus-04-july-2023#:~:text=Prominent%20political%20figures%2C%20such%20as,personnel%2C%20including%20Nobel%20Peace%20Prize>

Youth over-representation among political prisoners



Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU). Funded with public money and embedded in schools and universities, BRYU is used to recruit and monitor youth, organise staged demonstrations of support for the regime, and link participation with career opportunities or educational benefits.

Membership in BRYU is often informally mandatory. Dissenters are excluded, stigmatised, or punished. These structures perform political participation while actively suppressing independent thought. Its role has intensified since 2020. It now monopolises nearly all state resources for youth, controls access to social and educational benefits, and functions as the only affiliate youth institution still operating legally in Belarus. With independent groups suppressed, BRYU serves as both an ideological indoctrination tool and a passive surveillance network across schools, universities, and workplaces.

The result is a generation torn between fear and flight, with no space for safe engagement inside the country.

Exodus and Brain Drain

Mass exile has been another consequence of the repression. By some estimates, **more than 300,000 Belarusians** have had to flee since 2020 due to political repression⁸³. Many of these exiles are students, recent graduates, and young professionals who would have

formed the backbone of Belarus's future⁸⁴.

The mass migration of young Belarusians has escalated into a significant **brain drain**, with worrying implications for both Belarus and Europe. Crucially, the outflow is concentrated among the young and educated. Analysts estimate that roughly **5% of Belarus's working-age**



population has emigrated in the past three years, over half of them being skilled professionals under 35. This has led to acute labour shortages in key sectors: for instance, in 2022, the healthcare system was short 8,000 workers and the construction industry 11,000 workers compared to pre-crackdown levels.

The IT sector, previously a crown jewel of the Belarusian

⁸³ The protection of youth rights and support of young political prisoners of Belarus, Youth Forum, 2023. https://www.youthforum.org/files/231117_M-ProtectionYouthRights.pdf#:~:text=regime%20arrests%20citizens%20who%20believe,crisis%2C%20where%20their%20lives%20are

⁸⁴ What is happening in Belarusian education and academia four years after the presidential elections of August 2020? , New Eastern Europe Magazine, 2024. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2024/11/14/what-is-happening-in-belarusian-education-and-academia-four-years-after-the-presidential-elections-of-august-2020/#:~:text=Finally%2C%20there%20are%20efforts%20to,the%20first%20time%2C%20but%20now>

economy, has been hit especially hard by the exodus of youth. Belarus had cultivated a vibrant tech industry, but political instability and crackdowns after 2020 prompted thousands of IT specialists to relocate to more secure environments. The majority of those employed in the IT sector in Belarus are people under 40⁸⁵ years old. According to a 2019 study of the labor market in Belarus, the average age of IT specialists likewise stood at approximately 30 years⁸⁶. Despite a recorded increase of 1.5 years⁸⁷ in the average age within the sector between 2017 and 2019, the majority of professionals employed in the sector continued to be classified as young specialists. The IT sector, once a key economic driver, lost over 20,000 workers and saw its GDP contribution fall from 7.5% to 5% in a year, reversing years of growth⁸⁸. Losing so many young innovators and entrepreneurs weakens the current economy and diminishes the prospects for any future recovery or modernisation.

The Regime's Countermeasures

The Belarusian authorities implicitly acknowledge this brain drain problem through the frantic measures they have taken to stem the outflow. In 2023, the regime amended its military service law to penalise studying abroad: previously, young men could defer conscription by enrolling in a university (domestic or foreign), but now *"studying abroad is no longer grounds"* for draft exemption⁸⁹. This effectively tries to trap male students in Belarus under the threat of military conscription if they leave. The government is also expanding an anachronistic Soviet-era policy of mandatory job placements for graduates. Belarus is the only European country still assigning university graduates to compulsory two-year

postings (a policy called "distribution"). Now Lukashenka has ordered this to be extended to all graduates, even those who paid for their studies, and possibly lengthened up to five years. The aim is openly to *"halt the brain drain"* by tying young professionals to the country, as Lukashenka lamented the *"excessive outflow of high-skilled specialists"* in a 2023 speech⁹⁰.

Furthermore, in a move transparently designed to discourage academic emigration, Belarus *withdrew from an education recognition agreement with Poland*, causing Polish universities to require additional paperwork from Belarusian applicants. Belarus's Ministry of Education then began refusing to issue the needed certificates that prove a student's academic credentials, deliberately blocking young people from foreign study. Poland responded by simplifying the recognition of Belarusian diplomas unilaterally, but bureaucratic hurdles remain, and *"dozens of young people"* have been unable to enrol in Polish institutions due to missing documents, which they cannot safely obtain in Belarus⁹¹.

These regime tactics underscore the severity of Belarus's youth exodus. The mass flight of youth represents not just a demographic crisis for Belarus but a *security risk for Europe*. A Belarus drained of talent, with a collapsing economy, will be ever more dependent on external patronage (primarily Russia's) to stay afloat. This could lead to deeper integration of Belarus into Russia's military and economic structures, cementing a hostile bloc on the EU's border. Additionally, a continuing exodus could result in irregular migration pressures on neighbouring countries if pathways for legal study and work abroad are choked off—something the Lukashenka regime has previously exploited by orchestrating migrant crises.

⁸⁵ The ICT Sector in Belarus: From Growth to Contraction, SCEEUD, 2024. <https://sceeu.se/en/publications/the-ict-sector-in-belarus-from-growth-to-contraction/>

⁸⁶ IT in Belarus-2019, part 1, Dev.by, 2019. <https://devby.io/news/it-v-belarusi-2019-1?utm>

⁸⁷ IT in Belarus-2017, Dev.by, 2017. <https://devby.io/news/it-v-belarusi-2017?utm>

⁸⁸ A depopulating country. Belarus's demographic situation, OSW, 2023. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-10-17/a-depopulating-country-belaruss-demographic-situation#:~:text=The%20largest%20outflow%20of%20professionals,skilled%20specialists%2C%20which%20now%20confront>

⁸⁹ What is happening in Belarusian education and academia four years after the presidential elections of August 2020? , New Eastern Europe Magazine, 2024. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2024/11/14/what-is-happening-in-belarusian-education-and-academia-four-years-after-the-presidential-elections-of-august-2020/#:~:text=Belarusian%20authorities%20have%20created%20several,this%20distribution%20currently%20applies%20only>

⁹⁰ A depopulating country. Belarus's demographic situation, OSW, 2023. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-10-17/a-depopulating-country-belaruss-demographic-situation#:~:text=the%20regime%20has%20attempted%2C%20in,to%20five%20or%2C%20in%20some>

⁹¹ What is happening in Belarusian education and academia four years after the presidential elections of August 2020? , New Eastern Europe Magazine, 2024. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2024/11/14/what-is-happening-in-belarusian-education-and-academia-four-years-after-the-presidential-elections-of-august-2020/#:~:text=This%20summer%2C%20Polish%20President%20Andrzej,the%20required%20documents%20to%20pursue>



Response of the EU

Despite the pressure, thousands of Belarusian students have sought education abroad, unwilling to study in an oppressive environment at home. Neighbouring EU countries have opened their universities to these students – for example, the Polish government’s scholarships and the EU-supported *Kalinowski program*, as well as EU tools like Erasmus+ and EU4Youth⁹². As a result, Poland and Lithuania host large communities of Belarusian youth in exile. In Poland, as noted, there were about 12,000 Belarusian students in 2022, and several thousand are studying in Lithuania, Ukraine (before the war), and other Western European countries. However, these support measures remain scattered, underfunded, and hard to navigate.

The EU must view youth emigration as a strategic challenge and expand safe, legal pathways for education and employment, while keeping this generation connected to Europe. For Europe, there is a moral and strategic imperative to address this brain drain. By providing opportunities and support for Belarusian youth in exile, the EU can *mitigate the negative effects*

(for instance, by absorbing their skills into European economies in the short term) while preserving this human capital for a future democratic Belarus. Conversely, neglecting the problem could mean a lost generation and a persistent source of instability in Europe’s neighbourhood.

Ideological Indoctrination in Belarus

Inside Belarus, those young people who remain face another threat: the systematic misuse of education and information to indoctrinate and control them. With active support from Moscow, the Lukashenka regime is reshaping the educational system into an instrument of ideology and propaganda. This “*ideologization and militarisation*” of education serves to cement authoritarian rule in the present and to mould the worldview of the next generation in ways that align with Russian and Soviet narratives⁹³. Such efforts not only crush independent thought and academic freedom in Belarus but also pose long-term challenges for European security by alienating Belarusian youth from democratic values and aligning them with anti-Western sentiments.

⁹² Expelled and persecuted Belarusian students find refuge at Lithuanian universities, New Eastern Europe Magazin, 2021. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2021/02/15/expelled-and-persecuted-belarusian-students-find-refuge-at-lithuanian-universities/#:~:text=Expelled%20and%20persecuted%20Belarusian%20students,already%20filled%20in%20Honest>

⁹³ Belarus: the indoctrination of minors is rising in scale and taking on new forms, EU vs. DiSiNFO, 2023. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/belarus-the-indoctrination-of-minors-is-rising-in-scale-and-taking-on-new-forms/#:~:text=Belarus%3A%20the%20indoctrination%20of%20minors,and%20taking%20new%20worrying%20forms>

One facet of this strategy is the tightening of state control over all levels of education. In the wake of the 2020 protests, authorities moved aggressively to purge and monopolise the educational sphere. Private schools and universities, seen as potential havens of liberal thought, have been targeted for closure. A 2022 licensing law was used to force a mass shutdown of non-state educational institutions—over 20 private schools were shuttered, with only a handful allowed to continue operating under strict ideological supervision. Even tutorial centres that prepare students for university have been “inspected” and hit with politically motivated charges⁹⁴. Several independent higher education institutes (such as the University of Law and Social Information Technologies in Minsk) were outright closed in 2023, abruptly displacing *“several thousand students,”* who were forced to transfer to state universities, and leaving their professors unemployed. By closing alternatives, the regime enforces its official doctrine.

Within state educational institutions, authorities have launched an all-out campaign of political indoctrination. The 2022–2023 school year saw a *“major intensification of activities”* aimed at controlling young minds⁹⁵. Lukashenko declared 2023 a “Year of Peace and Creation,” and under this banner, schools introduced compulsory classes extolling the Belarus regime’s so-called achievements and promoting the government’s line on history and society. Curricula were revised to include *“specially selected motifs from Belarusian history”*, designed to boost patriotism—in practice, loyalty to Lukashenko. Schools nationwide have been ordered to establish patriotic exhibition rooms that display curated historical narratives. Tellingly, these exhibits are reported to be *“dominated by anti-Western and pro-Russian historical narratives.”* Soviet-era symbols and stories (celebrating the USSR and the Great Patriotic War narrative) are foregrounded, while symbols associated with Belarusian independence or the pro-democracy movement are denigrated or erased. The regime aims to reshape historical memory to block democratic narratives – a

challenge for EU soft power in the region.

The militarisation of youth education goes hand-in-hand with ideological conditioning. In late 2021, Belarus adopted a comprehensive Programme for the Patriotic Education of Citizens for 2022–2025⁹⁶. An Inter-Ministry Council for Patriotic Education – comprising top officials from the security apparatus, including the Defence Minister, KGB chief, and Interior Minister – was created to implement it. This programme explicitly frames schools as tools to bolster “national security” and combat perceived Western “information and political pressure” since 2020. It has led to initiatives like forming military and patriotic clubs in schools and universities. Under a May 2022 decree, military units and even KGB officers have been instructed to conduct extracurricular classes and drills for youth. By embedding the security forces into educational activities, the regime is normalising a state of siege mentality among children, teaching them loyalty through military-style discipline and fear. The intended outcome is a ***generation that conflates patriotism with obedience to authority and willingness to fight*** perceived enemies of the state.

A particularly concerning development is the explicit coordination between Belarus and Russia in the ideological sphere, carried out within the framework of Union State integration. High-level Russian officials have called for *“complete integration into a unified cultural and ideological space”* with Belarus⁹⁷. In 2023, a joint commission on ‘historical enlightenment’ was created to enforce a shared ideological narrative across Belarus and Russia. Its task is to enforce a “correct” version of historical memory across both countries.

A glaring example of Russification is the marginalisation of the Belarusian language in schools. The long-term trend of replacing Belarusian with Russian in education has accelerated. By the 2020–2021 school year, only 10.2% of Belarusian primary and secondary students were taught in Belarusian; the rest studied exclusively in

⁹⁴ What is happening in Belarusian education and academia four years after the presidential elections of August 2020?, New Eastern Europe Magazine, 2024. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2024/11/14/what-is-happening-in-belarusian-education-and-academia-four-years-after-the-presidential-elections-of-august-2020/#:~:text=The%20ideologization%20and%20monopolization%20of,authorities%20%20have%20been>

⁹⁵ Education serves the regime. The ideologisation and militarisation of the Belarusian education system, OSW, 2023. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-05-17/education-serves-regime-ideologisation-and-militarisation#:~:text=The%202022%2F3%20school%20year%20saw,from%20the%20history%20of%20Belarusian>

⁹⁶ Education serves the regime. The ideologisation and militarisation of the Belarusian education system, OSW, 2023. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-05-17/education-serves-regime-ideologisation-and-militarisation#:~:text=Another%20purpose%20of%20the%20recently,regime%E2%80%99s%20leading%20propagandists%20Alyaksandr%20Shpakouski>

⁹⁷ Belarus and Russia Aim for Complete Integration into a Unified Cultural and Ideological Space, Belarus in Focus, , 2024. <https://belarusinfocus.pro/belarus-russia-relations/belarus-and-russia-aim-for-complete-integration-into-a-unified-cultural-and-ideological-space/#:~:text=He%20explained%20the%20need%20for,%E2%80%9D>

Russian⁹⁸. (Just five years earlier, 13% of the population studied Belarusian, demonstrating that the share was already low and is continuing to drop.) At the vocational and university level, virtually all instruction is in Russian. Lukashenka's government has thus nearly achieved the goal of linguistic homogenization under Russian dominance. In September 2022, Lukashenka openly ordered the closure of "anti-state" private schools—many of which used Belarusian as a medium—making clear that only institutions guaranteeing the "correct ideological narrative" would be allowed. The erosion of the Belarusian language and culture in education paves the way for Russian narratives to face fewer local cultural barriers and increases the urgency for the EU and its member states to support Belarusian-language and cultural initiatives.

All these trends point to a profound battle for the hearts and minds of Belarusian youth, with the authoritarian regime, backed by Russia, on one side and democratic values on the other. The more successful Lukashenka is in indoctrinating young people, the harder it will be to integrate a future free Belarus with Europe, and the more likely that Belarus will remain a security threat as a forward post for Russian influence. It is therefore in the EU's strategic interest to counter this indoctrination and keep the channels of independent information and education open to Belarusians. Failing to do so could result in a lost generation estranged from Europe and disinclined to pursue democratic change.

Erosion of EU Influence and Growing Russian Leverage

The coercive isolation of Belarusian youth from Western contacts has led to a worrying erosion of EU soft power in Belarus and a concomitant increase in Russian ideological leverage. Over the past few years, Belarus's official ties with Europe have been severed or frozen due to the regime's actions, drastically reducing the EU's direct engagement with Belarusian society. In June 2021, the Belarusian authorities suspended the country's participation in the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP). This framework had facilitated people-to-people exchanges, educational programmes, and dialogue with the EU. Consequently, many EU-sponsored initiatives – from youth exchanges to civil society

projects – had to be reconfigured to operate in exile. Visa facilitation agreements were partially suspended, and Belarus's state institutions cut off cooperation, limiting opportunities for young Belarusians to travel to or study in Europe through official channels.

Within Belarus, the regime's information crackdown has greatly narrowed the influence of European media and culture. All major independent news outlets, including those with pro-European orientations, have been banned or driven out (often labelled "extremist"). EU institutions should reorient their communication strategy to reach Belarusian youth through exile-based digital media and secure access to alternative narratives, using tools like *EUvsDisinfo*. The state now monopolises the information space, broadcasting a narrative closely aligned with Kremlin talking points. Russian state media content is pervasive on Belarusian TV and online platforms, filling the void left by the silenced independent Belarusian voices. Young people, who are heavy internet users, find popular social media and news sites blocked or branded as extremist if they carry dissenting content. For example, the regime has designated even apolitical platforms like specific Telegram channels and the websites of youth groups like RADA as "extremist," deterring youth from accessing them. This drives many to rely on Russian social networks and media for information, where Kremlin influence is strong.

The Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine in which the Kremlin's narrative dominates Belarusian state media, has further amplified anti-Western messaging, portraying NATO and the EU as aggressors and justifying Russia's actions as protection of the "Motherland"⁹⁹. For instance, in May 2024, Belarusian schools were instructed to show a video address by a Russian Orthodox cleric in Minsk that praised Russian soldiers in Ukraine for "fighting for our peace". They drew parallels to the Soviet fight against Nazi Germany. Such propaganda equates Western support for Ukraine with Nazism, an intensely inflammatory message aimed at youth.

A generation of Belarusians is being taught to view democracy and Western institutions with suspicion or outright hostility, while glorifying authoritarian "stability" and Russian-led integration. *EU soft power among Belarusian youth is eroding as a result.*

⁹⁸ Education serves the regime. The ideologisation and militarisation of the Belarusian education system, OSW, 2023. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-05-17/education-serves-regime-ideologisation-and-militarisation#:~:text=It%20is%20worth%20noting%20in,14>

⁹⁹ Belarus: the indoctrination of minors is rising in scale and taking on new forms, EU vs Disinfo, 2024, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/belarus-the-indoctrination-of-minors-is-rising-in-scale-and-taking-on-new-forms/#:~:text=Recently%2C%20the%20Exarchate%20of%20the,Western%20disinformation%20and%20propaganda>



The result is that Russian narratives increasingly shape the worldview of Belarusian youth, while European perspectives are marginalised. Despite polling limits, surveys suggest that pro-Russian sentiment remains significant, especially given the state propaganda barrage. In contrast, pro-European sentiment, while still present, is primarily confined to circles with access to independent media (often via VPN or in exile). Anecdotaly, some Belarusian youth – even those who have spent time in the EU – express ambivalence, saying life in the West is “over-hyped” and indicating they might prefer to return to Belarus if only economic conditions improved¹⁰⁰. Such views reflect the subtle effectiveness of propaganda that emphasises material stability and paints Western democracy as chaotic.

It must be stressed that not all is lost in terms of European appeal. The very fact that tens of thousands of young Belarusians chose EU countries as their refuge indicates a reservoir of goodwill and aspiration toward Europe. Many youth in Belarus remain quietly pro-

European or at least curious about Europe, but they currently lack avenues to experience it. The EU’s cultural and educational influence can still be felt indirectly – for instance, through the Belarusian diaspora’s social media, or clandestine use of VPNs to watch YouTube bloggers. Yet the longer the isolation persists, the greater the risk that a new normal sets in where young Belarusians see Russia as their primary (or sole) partner and the EU as irrelevant or antagonistic.

Strategically, the “battle of narratives” in Belarus is a microcosm of the wider contest between democratic and authoritarian models in Eastern Europe. Suppose the EU cedes the informational and cultural space entirely to Moscow and Minsk. In that case, it may turn out that Belarusian society, especially the new generation, has shifted firmly into the Kremlin’s orbit in terms of identity and alignment. This would entrench an authoritarian buffer state on the EU’s frontier, hostile to European values and possibly willing to be used in aggression against neighbours (as we saw when Lukashenko allowed

100 Building The New Elite Of Belarus—In Lithuania, Worldcrunch, 2014. <https://worldcrunch.com/culture-society/building-the-new-elite-of-belarus-in-lithuania/#:~:text=Brain%20drain%20effects>

Russian troops to use Belarus as a staging ground against Ukraine in 2022). Conversely, if the EU can maintain or rebuild its soft-power engagement (through education, culture, and communication), it keeps alive the prospect of a future Belarus that looks westward and embraces reform.

In summary, Russian influence is exploiting the void left by reduced Western engagement, aiming to “suffocate” Belarus’s distinct identity and align it wholly with Russia. European policymakers should treat this as a warning sign. The credibility of the EU and its values in the eyes of Belarusian youth needs bolstering through visible support and outreach, even if direct cooperation with the Belarusian state is impossible under current conditions.

Economic and Security Implications of Youth Repression

Youth repression harms both the economy and security. A nation that drives out or suppresses its young talent is sabotaging its own future. For Belarus, the loss of so many educated young people and the stifling of education and innovation will likely result in long-term economic decline, increased dependency on foreign powers, and potential social instability – all of which are concerning from a European security perspective.

Internally, Belarus faces brewing demographic and economic pressure. With an ageing population and now a drained pool of young workers, the country’s productivity and growth potential are plummeting. Official data show that Belarus’s workforce numbered about 4.3 million in 2020 but had fallen to just over 4.2 million two years later¹⁰¹.

This weakened economy has a domino effect on security. **First**, it makes the Belarusian state more financially dependent on Russia and other external lenders. Already, Russia has provided loans and subsidies to keep Lukashenka’s government solvent amid sanctions and stagnation. With fewer young taxpayers and entrepreneurs, Minsk will lean even more on Moscow for support, potentially trading bits of sovereignty (such as control over strategic industries or expanded Russian military presence) in return. An economically vassalized Belarus is likely to be a pliant tool for Kremlin foreign policy – a clear risk factor for Europe.

Second, widespread youth unemployment or underemployment (for those who neither flee nor are allowed to flourish) could lead to social unrest and desperation. While open protest is near impossible under current repression, there is a danger that, as economic conditions deteriorate, some youths might be driven into illicit activities or radical opposition. The regime’s practice of criminalising even mild dissent leaves no legal outlet for grievances. Economic malaise and harsh political repression can be volatile in the long term, possibly resulting in sudden destabilisation or violence. Any abrupt crisis in Belarus – whether economic collapse or political upheaval – would have direct spillover effects on neighbouring EU states, e.g., through refugee flows, security vacuum, etc..

Third, the brain drain represents a loss of human capital for the entire region, not just Belarus. Young Belarusians are now contributing their talents elsewhere instead of in their homeland. In the short term, countries like Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia benefit from an influx of skilled Belarusian workers and students, which can boost those economies. However, this benefit is tempered by integration challenges and the trauma many of these exiles carry. Moreover, these young people often hope to return to a free Belarus one day. If that prospect dims with time, Europe could end up with a semi-permanent displaced community that struggles with identity and purpose. On the flip side, if conditions do change in Belarus down the line, the expectation will be that many expatriates return home, which could suddenly deprive EU economies of a cohort of workers. Planning for such scenarios is complex.

Finally, the opportunity cost of youth repression is immense. Instead of contributing to positive developments – startups, cultural exchanges, scientific research—Belarus’s brightest minds are either languishing in jail or channelled into survival mode. The region loses out on potential cross-border collaboration and innovation that a free, engaged Belarusian youth could bring. For example, before 2020, Belarusian IT firms were increasingly partnering with EU companies, and students participated in Erasmus+ programmes and regional youth forums. All that goodwill and connectivity have been interrupted. The longer this continues, the harder it will be to rebuild those networks.

In essence, the suppression of Belarus’s youth is economically self-defeating for Belarus and creates a

¹⁰¹ A depopulating country. Belarus’s demographic situation, OSW, 2023. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-10-17/a-depopulating-country-belarus-demographic-situation#:~:text=economy%20is%20also%20worth%20noting,some%20of%20whom%20had%20retired>



more brittle state that is a security wildcard on Europe's border. It is in the EU's interest to mitigate these economic implications by supporting Belarusian talent and keeping it engaged (even if outside Belarus for now), thereby preserving the human capital needed to reconstruct a post-authoritarian Belarus and maintaining stability in the interim.

Youth as Agents of Democratic Change and Resilience

Amid these challenges, it is essential to recognise that Belarusian youth are not merely passive victims or a "lost generation." They have demonstrated remarkable resilience, creativity, and commitment to democratic values, offering hope that with support, they can drive positive change. Tapping into this potential is crucial for the future security and prosperity of Belarus and the wider European region.

The 2020 protests themselves were a testament to the courage and democratic aspirations of Belarus's young people. Students and recent graduates formed the core of many protest marches, and youth-led initiatives (from creative street art to flash mobs) energised the movement. Although the regime crushed the protests, it could not extinguish the desire for a freer society among the young. In the underground and in exile, Belarusian youth have continued to organise. They are adapting tactics, using encrypted communications and diaspora networks to maintain activism. As the Council of Europe's Youth Department observed in a 2023 workshop, *"the youth in Belarus has never experienced democracy*

and is living in constant fear of persecution," yet young Belarusians "are constantly finding new ways to associate, meet, exchange, and disrupt with their creativity" despite the multifaceted challenges¹⁰². This resilience—the ability to self-organise even under extreme repression—is a key asset for any future democratic opening.

The burgeoning **Belarusian diaspora youth community in Europe** is increasingly organised and engaged. In EU countries like Lithuania, Poland, and Germany, exiled Belarusian students and young professionals have formed associations, NGOs, and media projects to both support their compatriots and keep attention on Belarus. For instance, the Belarusian National Youth Council RADA, after being banned at home, continues to operate from abroad, coordinating youth NGOs and advocating internationally for Belarusian youth rights. These networks are natural allies for EU-funded youth initiatives, and should be integrated into programmes like Erasmus+, EU4Youth, and Council of Europe youth dialogues. Similarly, the Belarusian Students' Association has reconstituted itself in exile to document academic repression and assist displaced students. These groups serve as the institutional memory and backbone of civil society in exile, preserving a pro-democracy Belarusian identity and passing down organisational skills to younger activists.

Education remains a critical front. Supported by European partners, Belarusian educators have created avenues for students to continue learning free from indoctrination. The most notable example is the European Humanities University (EHU) in Vilnius—a Belarusian liberal arts university in exile. EHU, which was forced out of Minsk in 2004 by Lukashenka, has since become a hub for Belarusian youth to obtain a quality

¹⁰² A youth agenda for democracy and human rights in Belarus, Council of Europe, 2025. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/a-youth-agenda-for-democracy-and-human-rights-in-belarus#:~:text=Image%20The%20youth%20in%20Belarus%20has,across%20the%20spectrum%20of%20Belarusian>

education in a democratic environment. As of the early 2020s, EHU enrolls about 1,800 students—95% of them from Belarus—with funding from the EU and other donors to cover scholarships and operations. These students are being trained in critical thinking and civic engagement, nurtured as a future “new elite” for a post-Lukashenka Belarus. Many express a desire to return home once things change for the better. By investing in such institutions, Europe is building the capacity for democratic renewal. The presence of thousands of Belarusian youth studying in European universities (beyond EHU as well) means there is a growing pool of young people familiar with European values, languages, and best practices – an invaluable resource for transforming Belarus when the opportunity arises.

Hundreds of Belarusian volunteers – a significant number of them young men and women – joined the fight on Ukraine’s side against the Russian invasion, forming units like the Kastus Kalinowski Regiment. These volunteers view the defence of Ukraine as intrinsically linked to the freedom of Belarus. Their bravery and combat experience could translate into a powerful pro-democracy force in Belarus in the future. Such elements show that a segment of Belarusian youth is willing to risk life and limb for the cause of freedom in Eastern Europe.

In the cultural sphere, exiled Belarusian youth actively preserve and promote the Belarusian language, arts, and historical memory, countering the regime’s russification efforts. They organise cultural festivals, publish books and magazines in Belarusian, and run YouTube channels and podcasts from abroad. This cultural resilience is essential – it keeps alive the idea of a Belarusian national identity distinct from the authoritarian narrative, one aligned with European heritage. For example, diaspora youth groups have created online libraries of banned Belarusian literature and facilitate virtual discussions that connect young people inside and outside the country. These efforts help Belarusian youth maintain a sense of community and purpose, reducing the atomization that the regime tries to impose.

Importantly, Belarusian youth activists and opposition figures are engaging with international institutions to keep Belarus on the agenda. Young Belarusian voices were present in forums like the EU’s Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (until Belarus’s official suspension)

and continue to appear in side-events around the United Nations and OSCE. The newly established United Nations Youth Office and various EU youth platforms have been urged to include Belarusian youth representatives in dialogues¹⁰³. This not only empowers the Belarusian youth with advocacy experience, but also ensures the international community hears directly from those affected. The European Youth Forum, for instance, passed a resolution in late 2023 calling for the protection of Belarusian young political prisoners and greater international support for Belarusian youth activists. Such advocacy is slowly bearing fruit: the Council of Europe in 2024 launched a dedicated project “Democratic Participation with Belarusian Youth Civil Society,” which brings together exiled Belarusian youth leaders and European stakeholders¹⁰⁴. This kind of engagement treats Belarusian youth not just as beneficiaries of aid but as partners in shaping their country’s future.

In sum, Belarusian youth have shown that they are *not giving up*. Despite the repression, they remain one of the most pro-change demographics in the country. Their energy and ingenuity continue to manifest in various forms – educational pursuits, digital activism, cultural preservation, and even armed resistance against tyranny. These qualities are needed to eventually rebuild Belarus as a democratic, sovereign nation integrated into the European family. For the EU, nurturing these qualities through sustained support is an investment with potentially enormous returns: a future ally in place of a current adversary at Europe’s border.

Conclusion

Supporting Belarusian youth is a strategic investment in the European Union’s long-term security, democratic resilience, and regional stability. As Belarus occupies a critical geopolitical position between the EU and Russia, its future trajectory will have a direct impact on the security architecture of Eastern Europe. This trajectory will be shaped by the current generation of young Belarusians.

Preventing this generation from being lost to repression, indoctrination, or forced emigration is essential. A Belarus that continues on its current path, marked by authoritarianism, population decline, and deepening dependence on Russia, presents multiple risks to the EU.

¹⁰³ The protection of youth rights and support of young political prisoners of Belarus, Youth Forum, 2023. https://www.youthforum.org/files/231117_M-ProtectionYouthRights.pdf#:~:text=University%20Press%2C%201999%29%2C%20p,Such%20conditions%2C%20described%20by

¹⁰⁴ A youth agenda for democracy and human rights in Belarus, Council of Europe, 2025. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/a-youth-agenda-for-democracy-and-human-rights-in-belarus#:~:text=Image%2%A0These%20were%20key%20messages%20from,Europe%2C%20including%20Belarusian%20democratic%20forces>

These include serving as a base for military provocations, hybrid threats, and regional destabilisation.

Belarusian youth remain key to any democratic transformation. Many have already demonstrated a strong commitment to democratic principles, especially during the 2020 protests. In the event of political change, they are the most likely to lead efforts to rebuild institutions, restore the economy, and reestablish international relationships. Engaging with them now lays the foundation for a democratic transition in the future. The experience of Central and Eastern Europe shows that youth and student movements supported under authoritarian rule often became drivers of democratic change, as seen in Poland and the Baltic States during the 1980s.

Engagement with Belarusian youth also contributes to short-term security objectives. Providing educational and research opportunities within the EU reduces the risk of recruitment by hostile intelligence services or extremist groups. Offering legal pathways for study and mobility helps counter the regime's use of migration as a political weapon. Keeping young Belarusians connected to Europe reinforces the message that the EU remains a partner, not an adversary, and limits the effectiveness of anti-Western propaganda.

Such engagement is consistent with the EU's declared values and international commitments, including United Nations resolutions on youth, peace, and security. Focusing on youth ensures that democratic aspirations are carried into the future. It also reflects the EU's responsibility to respond meaningfully to human rights abuses, particularly against young people. Failure to act may embolden other authoritarian regimes, while meaningful support would demonstrate that the EU stands firmly with pro-democracy movements.

To sum up, engagement with Belarusian youth serves both strategic and normative objectives. It supports a more secure and democratic neighbourhood and strengthens the EU's credibility as a promoter of human rights and democratic values. Without proactive support today, the cost of inaction may be significantly higher in the future, whether through humanitarian crises, increased militarisation, or the collapse of a neighbouring society. With targeted resources and political commitment, the EU can help shape a future Belarus that is democratic, stable, and aligned with European principles.



Recommendations

Strategic goal: to counter the repression and indoctrination of Belarusian youth and prepare them as key agents of democratic transition by strengthening resilience, sustaining independent identity, and enabling future reintegration into the European democratic space.

The European Union, in close coordination with international partners including the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE, plays a central role in addressing the systemic repression of Belarusian youth and fostering their potential as contributors to a democratic future. This engagement should advance along two complementary tracks:

A. Mitigation of Current Risks

To follow this track the EU should:

01.

To scale up educational access and exchanges by:

- Increasing Belarus-specific quotas in Erasmus+, EU4Youth, and national scholarship schemes. Expand access to academic programmes for both exiled and in-country students (via safe third countries), including summer schools and short-term exchanges designed to expose youth to democratic norms and critical thinking.

02.

To support independent learning and access to uncensored information by:

- Funding secure digital platforms that offer pluralistic education in history, civics, and media literacy;
- Distributing alternative learning materials through exile networks;
- Investing in tools to bypass censorship and support youth-friendly counter-disinformation strategies via platforms such as EUvsDisinfo.

03.

To bolster youth civil society and democratic networks by:

- Providing financial, technical, and moral support to Belarusian youth organisations operating in exile and, where possible, underground.
- Facilitating engagement with European youth platforms, such as the European Youth Parliament, Council of Europe youth structures, and OSCE human dimension events. Support institutional continuity of organisations like RADA and the Belarusian Students' Association.

04.

To ease legal mobility and access to residency by:

- Simplifying visa and residence procedures for young Belarusians seeking study, employment, or refuge in the EU;
- Expanding humanitarian visa channels and adopting flexible documentation procedures (including conditional university enrollment).
- Replicating and scaling programmes like Poland's "Business Harbour" initiative across Member States to attract and retain Belarusian youth talent.

05.

To preserve Belarusian identity and counter ideological indoctrination by:

- Funding Belarusian-language content and youth-targeted media (e.g. podcasts, YouTube, digital platforms);
- Supporting Belarusian studies and cultural heritage programmes in EU institutions;
- Highlighting violations of education freedom and cultural rights at UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and other relevant forums.

06.

To provide psychosocial support and build diaspora community resilience by:

- Funding mental health services and trauma-informed care for youth in exile;
- Establishing community centres in EU host countries to foster identity, belonging, and mutual support;
- Prioritising peer-led initiatives to reduce disconnection and strengthen resilience.

07.

To promote accountability for youth repression by:

- Expanding EU sanctions lists to include individuals involved in the targeting of students, educators, and independent education providers;
- Supporting international evidence-gathering initiatives (e.g. the UN Human Rights Council and Special Rapporteur mandates) to document abuses and reinforce future accountability processes.

B.

Preparation for Democratic Transition

To follow this path the EU should:

01.

To coordinate international support for youth security through a Joint Action Framework to address the systemic repression of Belarusian youth and support their meaningful role in a future democratic transition.

- This framework should align international efforts in the areas of education, civic engagement, cultural preservation, and transitional justice.
- A unified approach would signal that Europe is committed to investing in the future of Belarusian youth, reinforcing their resilience and encouraging continued civic engagement despite authoritarian constraints.

02.

To coordinate multilateral support for youth-focused programming by:

- Leading a joint effort involving the Council of Europe, OSCE, G7, and international donors to fund Belarusian youth initiatives;
- Establishing a multi-partner trust fund dedicated to education, civic engagement, and identity preservation;
- Reviving international youth support schemes previously deployed during transitions in Central and Eastern Europe.

Conclusion

The Red Paper highlights a crucial yet often overlooked challenging reality: the stability and security of Europe are closely tied to the political trajectory and future developments in Belarus. Under the current authoritarian regime, Belarus represents a systematic risk within the broader European security framework, serving as a platform for Russian operations aimed at regional destabilisation and the erosion of European cohesion. At the same time, a democratic Belarus holds immense potential to enhance European security by contributing to regional stability, fostering resilience-building, and progressively aligning with EU institutional standards and normative frameworks.

European policy toward Belarus remains strategically underdeveloped and inadequately calibrated to the hybrid complexity of threats posed by the country's authoritarian regime in alliance with Russia. The existing approach, which predominantly relies on reactive sanctions and rhetorical condemnations, has failed to systematically constrain the regime's operational capabilities or to provide long-term pathways for democratic transition. Furthermore, Belarus remains largely peripheral in EU security planning, still viewed primarily through the lens of Russia or Ukraine rather than recognised as a distinct strategic issue on the political and security agenda.

What is needed is not just minor tactical adjustment but a comprehensive strategic policy reframing. Belarus must be repositioned as a core element of EU security. This requires a coordinated, forward-looking, and comprehensive multidimensional engagement, with several core elements:



01.	02.	03.	04.
A focused effort to isolate the Belarusian regime's sources of military, financial, technological, and informational support.	Long-term support for Belarusian democratic forces in exile, aimed at ensuring their financial stability, organisational capacity, and strategic sustainability.	Structured cooperation and institutional partnerships of Belarusian democratic forces with regional partners, such as Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states, particularly on border security, hybrid threat monitoring, and coordinated contingency planning.	A deliberate shift in EU strategic narratives to frame Belarus not merely as a site of Russian influence and domestic repression, but as a key factor shaping Europe's long-term security posture.

The EU's failure to act decisively risks enabling further consolidation of Belarus' authoritarian regime as a permanent operational extension of Russian power. Positioned directly on the EU's borders, such a regime would continue to serve as a sustained platform for long-term destabilisation across multiple domains. In contrast, a coherent EU policy centered on proactive containment, support for democratic resilience, and the long-term strategic integration of Belarusian democratic forces into European institutions would substantially reduce Russia's asymmetric leverage in Belarus. Such an approach would not only mitigate security threats emanating from this country but it would also strengthen the EU's eastern flank and contribute to broader regional stability through the advancement of democratic governance and alignment with European norms.

Belarus represents both a current hybrid threat and a future democratic opportunity. The EU ability to respond effectively to the dual challenge will be a defining test of its strategic capacity to shape and secure its own geopolitical environment.

Prepared by the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Vilnius, 2025

In partnership with iSANS, National Anti-Crisis Management, United Transitional Cabinet, Belpol.

Experts: Aliaksandr Dabravolski, Alina Kharysava, Dzmitry Kruk, Dr. Victoria Leukavets, Zmicier Mickievič, Francisak Viacorka, Marharyta Vorykhava, Anastasiya Luzgina (BEROC Senior Researcher), iSANS experts, and others*

Editor-in-Chief: Alina Kharysava

Project coordinator: Alina Kharysava, Dr. Vadim Mojeiko

*This document also includes analytical and editorial contributions from additional experts, analysts and editors, affiliated with Belarusian and European think tanks and universities, whose identities are withheld for security reasons.



**SVIATLANA
TSIKHANOUSKAYA
OFFICE**



The International Strategic Action
Network for Security

**NATIONAL
ANTI-CRISIS
MANAGEMENT**

BELPOL